CHAPTER THREE

Let Them Eat Brains

PRESIDENTS ARE ALWAYS ALSO STORYTELLERS, PURVEYORS OF USEFUL NATIONAL mythologies. And surprisingly enough, Richard Nixon, this awkward man who didn't even really like people, had not been so bad at the duty—at least in the first four years of his presidency.

At his inauguration he promised to "bring us together"; pundits swooned. A little more than nine months later he delivered one of the most politically successful addresses in the history of the presidency: the "Silent Majority" speech, which in a single evening increased the number of Americans who approved of his handling of the Vietnam War by 19 percentage points. In August 1971, at the lowest political ebb of his term, against a backdrop of some of the darkest economic portents since the Great Depression, he told a story about how he would protect the plain people from economic marauders menacing America from abroad, and sang out the dry economic details of Executive Order No. 11615, "Providing for the Stabilization of Prices, Rents, Wages, and Salaries," like a celestial chorus: "Today we hear echoes of those voices preaching a gospel of doom and defeat. . . . I say let Americans reply: 'Our best days lie ahead.'" A pollster said of the approval that followed, "I've never seen anything this unanimous, unless it was Pearl Harbor."

Storied diplomatic triumphs followed: the opening to China, agreements with the Soviet Union to beat nuclear missiles into plowshares, an apparent endgame in Vietnam at the Paris peace negotiations. A grateful nation granted him reelection against the Democrat George McGovern with forty-nine of fifty states and a record 61 percent of the vote, including millions who had never voted Republican before: Southern good ol' boys, hard-hat-wearing union members, Jews.

There had been speed bumps. On June 17, 1972, four Cuban burglars were caught breaking into Democratic headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington, D.C. One of their accomplices, James McCord, had headed security for the president's reelection office. The *Washington Post* discovered that two accomplices—E. Howard Hunt,

late of the CIA, and G. Gordon Liddy, of the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms—had worked in Nixon's White House and reelection campaign, respectively. But the political damage was deftly neutralized. "I'm not going to comment from the White House on a third-rate burglary attempt," the president's spokesman, Ron Ziegler, said, even as Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of the *Washington Post* kept up a steady stream of scoops tying the conspirators to the Nixon reelection campaign, and reported that squads of dirty tricksters had circulated the country sabotaging the Democratic contenders' campaigns. But the "third-rate burglary" explanation held. The *Chicago Tribune* did not run a front-page story on Watergate until late in August. A Watergate inquiry by the fiercely independent chairman of the House Banking and Currency Committee, Wright Patman of Texas, could not win enough votes to go forward. Before the 1972 election, Gallup asked the public, "Which candidate—Mr. Nixon or Mr. McGovern—do you think is more sincere, believable?" Nixon won, 59 percent to 20. "Now," he wrote in his memoirs of his reelection landslide, "I planned to give expression to the more conservative values and beliefs of the New Majority throughout the country, and use my power to put some teeth into my New American Revolution."

In the weeks before his re-inauguration, during the Christmas season, no less, he had risked international opprobrium by carpet bombing North Vietnam for almost a fortnight. He weathered the political storm. He was weathering all the storms—and then, on January 27, 1973, he signed the Paris Peace Accords. The gross national product grew 8.7 percent in the first quarter. The Dow was high, unemployment low, inflation predicted to fall below the previous year's 3.5 percent—and, his economists told him, with no worry about more inflation in the long term. At the news of advance work for a summit in June with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev at Camp David, a twenty-three-year-old wrote to his hometown newspaper about how all his life it had been his "duty to hate two things: (1) Monday mornings and (2) Communists. I am no longer supposed to hate Communists, and now I fear that Monday mornings are in jeopardy. Is nothing sacred anymore?" In New York a group of supporters began researching a constitutional amendment to allow Nixon to serve a third term.

And so he took bold steps to remake Washington in his image. Chief of Staff H. R. "Bob" Haldeman sent a curt letter to hundreds of presidential appointees demanding their resignations; they were replaced with more loyal men. Nixon announced a radical reorganization of the executive branch to give the new loyalists more power. He announced

a labor leader as his new labor secretary, a historic first. That held out the promise of consummating one of his dearest dreams: to peel off the white working class from its historic attachment to the Democratic Party. "I think we're going to keep them split," his consigliere on the project, Charles Colson, enthused, "and I'm awful bullish about what we can do in this country."

The four burglars and their supervisor, Howard Hunt, pleaded guilty. The zealous G. Gordon Liddy refused to testify in the trial. Only James McCord appeared in the courtroom. The indictment was extraordinarily narrow—making the claims of Ted Kennedy or Woodward and Bernstein that this strange crime stood at the center of a matrix of Nixonian corruption sound fantastical. The trial began, ten days before the inauguration, in the gilded ceremonial courtroom of John J. Sirica, an obscure federal judge whose badgering of witnesses about matters beyond his brief—"Did they get any money to go in there? Was it purely for political espionage? What was the purpose?"—made him look like a fool. For example a handsome and smooth young treasurer in the Nixon campaign, Hugh Sloan, was asked about the time in the spring of 1972 he was authorized by his boss, an even smoother deputy campaign manager named Jeb Stuart Magruder, to pass over an enormous wad of cash:

"What was the purpose of turning over $199,000 to Liddy?"

"I have no idea."

"You have no idea?" the judge chuffed incredulously—and started pressing even more intently. Why, he wondered, every time cross-examination led to Nixon headquarters, or to questions regarding the hundreds of thousands of dollars other investigations had already established had been laundered through Mexico before passing through the malefactors' hands, did memories grow vague?

Timorous prosecutors did not follow his lead. On January 29, 1973, they closed their argument, noting that the defendants were "off on an enterprise of their own," apparently at the sole instigation of G. Gordon Liddy. At a cocktail party, the judge was asked only half jokingly if "the McGovern people have hired you to try to reverse what happened in November." The jury convicted McCord after only ninety minutes of deliberation. Judge Sirica complained, "I am still not satisfied that all the pertinent facts that might be available—I say *might* be available—have been produced before an American jury." He set bond at one hundred thousand dollars. Then he ran to the media to spread more imprecation. It got little coverage. The *New York Times* dismissed the judge's "dignified clamor." On February 7, the Senate set up a special subcommittee

under Senator Sam Ervin of North Carolina—not a nationally prominent name—to investigate 1972 Nixon campaign abuses. The resolution to establish it passed 77–0, and hardly would have been unanimous had anyone in Washington imagined it would amount to much. Senator Ervin himself considered it "simply inconceivable that Nixon might have been involved."

Operation Homecoming dawned. Borne aloft by its political capital, the president announced a budget that slashed his predecessor's Great Society programs. *Newsweek* called it "one of the most significant American political documents since the dawning of the New Deal." He also announced an unprecedented plan to simply refuse to spend—"impound"—$12 billion in funds already authorized by Congress. The Constitution said the legislative branch decided how tax dollars got spent. So Senator Ervin labeled him "King Richard," and opened a hearing on "whether the Congress of the United States shall remain a viable institution." Congressman Wright Patman, the day before Valentine's Day, said, "I have been in Congress under seven presidents . . . and never during this 44-year-old period have we been closer to one-man rule." Arkansas senator J. William Fulbright said Nixon might literally be committing an act of treason. Let them bray. Fulbright's hometown paper editorialized that he sounded like "an arcane and vaguely academic version of Joe McCarthy."

In March, in a speech flaying "soft-headed judges," Nixon proposed stern new anticrime measures. Then he vetoed a bill to help the handicapped. Exhilarated liberals, certain the president had overstepped, brought patients in wheelchairs to cheer the veto override vote. That vote, however, failed. Richard Nixon's approval rating was a staggering 65 percent. He looked forward to a spectacular second term.

THEN THINGS BEGAN TO GO OFF THE RAILS.

Saturday, March 17, the day Pat Nixon had observed her birthday for as long as her husband had been a politician—because that was St. Patrick's Day; she was actually born on March 16—the White House staged a concert starring Merle Haggard. Country music fans and Irish Catholics: both were among the traditionally Democratic blocs Nixon was trying to cement for the Republicans for all time—with some apparent success.

Guests wearing tuxedos arrived to a serenade of violin and harps. Haggard wore boots, an open-throated shirt, and a cowboy hat. The president toasted him: "We can't offer you moonshine, we can't offer you Irish whisky. But there's California champagne—watch out!"

A bluegrass band took the stage. Guests appeared to be embarrassed at the cultural mismatch.

Merle Haggard took the stage. He later said it felt like performing to mannequins. Came the dramatic highlight: a giant American flag rose from the back of the stage. Haggard swung into his law-and-order hit, "Okie from Muskogee."

The *New York Times* observed an incongruity: the president had three days earlier sent his message asking Congress to attack crime "without pity," but Haggard was a felon, convicted for robbery. The next week the *Chicago Tribune* ran a query from a reader: "Do you know whether he's the first ex-convict to perform in the White House?"

It spoke to an emerging dilemma: when people thought of the White House, crime was the image coming to mind. Watergate news stories had been accelerating. The Committee to Re-elect the President, mysteriously still in operation, kept on returning campaign contributions made by shady characters: $305,000 to a "reclusive Texas land dealer"; $100,000 to a Gulf Oil executive that "found its way through a Mexican bank to the leader of the bugging raid"; $250,000 to Robert L. Vesco, the "principal defendant in a Securities and Exchange Commission suit against the alleged looting of $224 million from Investors Overseas Services, Ltd." The General Accounting Office referred the cases to the Justice Department. The *Times* asked, "WHAT WAS THE MONEY FOR?" And: "Why, long after the election was over and the giant surplus was well-known, did an additional $246,000 dribble into the Nixon treasury in January and February?"

In hearings to permanently confirm L. Patrick Gray, acting FBI chief since the death of J. Edgar Hoover, Democrats accused Gray of coaching witnesses appearing before the Watergate grand jury. It arrived that an obscure White House aide named John Dean might be able to clear up the question of whether and why this had happened. But the president, citing an unfamiliar constitutional doctrine called "executive privilege," said Dean could not testify before any investigating body. A political cartoonist depicted Pat with a rolling pin as the president tried to sneak into bed after midnight: "And don't give me any of that 'executive privilege' nonsense!"

On March 23, in the ceremonial courtroom at the D.C. criminal courts building, Judge Sirica convened the apparently routine sentencing hearing of the "Watergate 7"—the four burglars, Howard Hunt, G. Gordon Liddy, and James McCord. Boredom was written in the sketch artists' faces. Then the judge announced he had received a letter from one of the defendants, McCord, and asked for a sealed envelope.

Faces perked up. This was not ordinary procedure.

The judge began reading aloud McCord's letter. It began by explaining why he hadn't responded frankly to the judge's questions about details of the case: "Several members of my family have expressed fear for my life if I disclose knowledge of the facts in this matter either publicly or to any government representatives. Whereas I do not share their concerns to the same degree, nevertheless, I do believe retaliatory measures will be taken against me, my family, and my friends should I disclose such facts. Such retaliation could destroy careers, income and reputation of persons who are innocent of any guilt whatever."

If he had answered those questions frankly at the time they were asked, the defendant said, the answer would have been, "There was political pressure applied to the defendants to plead guilty and remain silent.

"Perjury occurred during the trial of matters highly material to the very structure, orientation, and impact of the government's case and to the motivation of and intent of the defendants.

"Others involved in the Watergate operation were not identified during the trial when they could have been by those testifying.

"I would appreciate the opportunity to talk with you privately in chambers," the letter concluded. "Since I cannot feel confident in talking with an FBI agent, in testifying before a grand jury whose U.S. Attorneys work for the Department of Justice, or in talking with other government representatives, such a discussion with you would be of assistance to me."

"What all this means," wrote columnist Joseph Kraft—the kind of pundit editors around the country consulted to know exactly how much criticism of sacred cows was advisable—"is that the issue is obstruction of justice by a coverup at the highest levels." Watergate was about to be blown wide open.

Sirica's hunger for truth was displayed in the sentences he pronounced. Forty years for the four Cuban burglars, thirty-five years for Hunt, and forty-five years for McCord. These were terms more appropriate to unrepentant murderers than to the perpetrators of a "third-rate burglary." The judge then explained why he had issued them: the sentences were "provisional." If the defendants explained what they knew to the soon-to-be reconvened grand jury or the forthcoming Senate hearings, they would be reduced. That explained the shorter, six-year, eight-month sentence G. Gordon Liddy got: his lawyers had told Sirica that no matter what his sentence was, he would never, ever talk.

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AT HIS WEEKLY MEETING WITH THE REPUBLICAN CONGRESSIONAL LEADERSHIP, the president with the 65 percent approval rating was unexpectedly forced into a defensive crouch: "Hugh, I have nothing to hide," he told the Senate minority leader, Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania.

He repeated it: "The White House has nothing to hide."

Then, he said it a third time: "I repeat, we have nothing to hide and you are authorized to make that statement in my name."

He also repeated that he could not permit any members of his White House staff to appear before any grand jury or committee of Congress whatsoever: executive privilege. The senators, the papers reported, were "disturbed by the White House attitude." That was obvious enough, simply from the fact they'd leaked the meeting in such detail.

Kraft wrote that a "flurry of developments has transformed the Watergate affair from a sideshow into a political bomb that could blow the Nixon administration apart." Woodward and Bernstein got space on page A1 to remind readers of McCord's connection to all the most *Godfather*-like incidents, like the time the previous summer when former Nixon attorney general and campaign manager John Mitchell's unhinged wife, Martha, called UPI reporter Helen Thomas to say that she was being held in California as a "political prisoner." It had been McCord's arrest in the Watergate burglary, Bernstein and Woodward explained, that originally set Martha Mitchell off. "McCord also leased an office in downtown Washington last spring next to Senator Edmund S. Muskie's presidential campaign headquarters," they pointed out. "Muskie was the chief target of an elaborate campaign of political espionage and sabotage conceived in the White House and conducted against the Democratic presidential candidates in 1971–1972, according to federal sources."

Patterns were beginning to add up.

Patrick Gray admitted at his confirmation hearings that White House counsel John Dean had been present at FBI interrogations of Watergate witnesses. International Telephone & Telegraph Corporation, the company suspected of bribing the Nixon campaign in exchange for the dropping of an antitrust suit, was revealed to have hired a former CIA chief to influence a presidential election in Chile. Robert Vesco was reported to have allegedly delivered $200,000 in cash-filled suitcases to the Nixon campaign three days after a new campaign disclosure act made it illegal to do so. The Sunday *New York Times'* Week in Review section, which ran its Watergate roundup under a graphic of the roof of the White House blowing off, reported that the FBI had spied on hard-hitting reporter Daniel Schorr of CBS under the pretext of considering

him for a fictitious White House job. *Time* gingerly wondered how "persistent allegations . . . about safes full of secret campaign cash" comported with a White House "that has so strongly denounced the permissiveness and the decaying morality of modern life." Senator James Buckley of New York, brother of William F., likewise gingerly said the "reports indicate less than wholehearted cooperation by the administration." Lowell Weicker, the Connecticut Republican who would sit on the subcommittee investigating Watergate, was more blunt: he said that "somebody still in the White House" had to have directed political espionage in the 1972 Nixon reelection campaign.

The president could hardly take comfort in the fact that for the moment, the public's attention was still mostly elsewhere—on food prices, which had jumped more in January than any other month in twenty-five years. He promised they would drop soon. Instead, the Consumer Price Index for February rose at the highest rate since 1951. The price of meat was on a course to doubling within the year. In political cartoons, housewives asked butchers for steak on the layaway plan. Johnny Carson said meat prices were so high that "Oscar Mayer had his wiener appraised."

NO ONE WAS SURE WHERE THE IDEA OF A NATIONAL BOYCOTT OF MEAT IN the first week in April came from. Perhaps Connecticut, where a housewife saw a cartoon about the butcher selling beef on the installment plan, and explained to newspapers about the day she persuaded the junior members of the Connecticut Federation of Women's Clubs, then got her congressman to back them: "The more I laughed, the more I wanted to cry." Perhaps in Southern California's San Fernando Valley, where another housewife returned from her neighborhood market, telephoned her friend, and simply said: "It's time." Each telephoned five others, asking them to boycott on Tuesdays and Thursdays. ("We are focusing on particular days so they can see we have clout," the organizer said, like a Chicago ward heeler. "The American mother feels her family is threatened, you see. And you threaten a mother bear's cubs and watch out.") They distributed eighteen thousand leaflets, whose recipients mimeographed them in turn; by the middle of March they started getting calls from around the country—including one from a panicked executive of the South Dakota Stock Growers Association, who suggested they find cheaper cuts for their "family servings of protein."

President Nixon's consumer advisor, Virginia Knauer, made a presentation for the press, suggesting "liver, kidney, brains, and heart can be made into gourmet meals with seasoning, imagination, and more cook-

ing time." She then trilled, "From my own experience I have found a shopper can generally trim as much as ten percent off her food budget." An aide demonstrated a cost-per-serving slide rule for the cameras. On NBC that night, Knauer's lesson in home economy was the lead story. It was followed by a field report on a schoolteacher's wife who surreptitiously slipped horse meat into her husband's sandwiches (a similar story made it onto an episode that fall of *All in the Family*).

Cut to an ad for Bayer pain reliever.

The president repeated Mrs. Knauer's let-them-eat-liver advice from his news conference podium; the mail in response, the Week in Review reported, was "unprintable." At the Merle Haggard concert the White House served broiled chicken as a national example. Fishmongers started profiteering: a pound of striped bass went for fifty cents on Monday, and ninety cents at week's end. "It makes me literally sick to go into the grocery store," a suburban Washington mother told the *Post*.

The White House begged the boycotters to have patience, saying price controls would only compound the problem. Instead, the movement snowballed. Housewives in Manhattan marched behind a cow marked "WE WANT MEAT NOT PROMISES," demanding prices be rolled back to December 1972 levels. In Chicago activists passed out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to pedestrians at the Dirksen Senate Office Building—demanding *1967* prices. "I don't know what Nixon is eating for lunch today," said one of them, a housewife named Jan Schakowsky, a leader in the burgeoning consumers' movement, "but I bet there's meat on the table." San Francisco demonstrators mailed yard-long sticks of bologna—a pound of which having gone up forty cents in price in two years—to President Nixon and Governor Reagan.

RONALD REAGAN AT HIS SACRAMENTO PRESS CONFERENCE THAT WEEK was remarkably blithe about the whole thing, as if the government shouldn't be concerned about popular outrage at all. This price rise, he said, was caused by bad weather, that's all—and "I'm not in favor of picketing Him." He said he knew what he was talking about, as a cattle rancher himself. The press gaggle thought that was a curious thing to bring up, for it only reminded people of his biggest controversy as governor so far.

In 1971, a student-operated radio station at Sacramento State College reported that Reagan's 1970 tax return claimed he owed precisely zero dollars and zero cents. Reagan was befuddled when confronted with the news at a press conference; then he offered a recollection that he might have got a *refund* on his federal taxes. The governor's office released a

statement saying the reason was unspecified "business reverses." He refused to say anything more—with a vengeance: "We fought a war about that! I say all men have a right to be safe in their books and records. That's what the Revolution was about."

One month later, the *Sacramento Bee* broke the story of what these "business reverses" entailed, and it was a doozy: the governor had contracted with a company that advertised to clients with a net worth of at least $500,000 that "tax laws favor cattle. . . . When you buy them, you become a farmer and can keep your books on a cash basis. You put in dollars that depreciate or are deductible. You take out capital gains." Voilà: newly minted cowboys, whose ranks included Jack Benny, Alfred Hitchcock, and Arnold Palmer, "lose" enough money, in the company's boast, "to avoid or postpone payment of any income tax." The inquiries compounded, sending Reagan's wife Nancy into a rage. She said she hoped her husband would never run for office again, because "I'd always believed that people are basically good, and I'm trying very hard to hold on to that," but politics, she now realized, was "dirty." The *New York Times* discovered steers with "Reagan Cattle Company" brands in states hundreds of miles away—a "Trident Bar" mark in Wyoming, a "Gunsight R" in Montana, and a "Gunsight Rocking R" in Nevada. They also tracked down a copy of Reagan's contract with the company, signed by his personal attorney and close friend William French Smith. This, apparently, was what he meant two years later when he called himself a "rancher."

But the story had quickly faded: of the networks, only ABC paid attention, giving it all of twenty seconds; Democrats were too high-minded in their attacks to be effectual; and only one politician proved palpitatingly ambitious enough to leverage the story for publicity and release his own taxes (Georgia governor Jimmy Carter, who had paid $13,339.31 on $46,542.66 in income). But here Reagan was now, raising the issue again, of his own volition—and reporters pounced:

"Governor, a few years ago there was a revelation of your investment in beef cattle. Do you still have an investment in that area?"

Firmly, confidently, he returned: "They were bulls. Breeding bulls. A small herd of breeding bulls. And I have been disposing of those." Then he deftly changed the subject with a blizzard of authoritative-sounding gibberish about two-year-old weather statistics and the role of corn in determining cattle prices in the marketing stage. His inquisitors gave up. Once he got wrapped into one of his stories, they knew further questioning was futile. The way he managed to convey simple innocence in the face of a complex morass: it was almost preternatural. How could

you make anything stick to someone who radiated confidence like that? He was like that stuff pots and pans were covered with—Teflon. Some reporters had given up attempting to interview him altogether: "It's just like hearing the same record over and over again. I don't think he knows how to be candid." Sacramento novices who scored interviews nonetheless would emerge thrilled with the wonderful material they unearthed—only to look at old Reagan speeches, and find out the words were identical.

THE DAY BEFORE JAMES MCCORD'S LETTER, THE UNITED AUTO WORKERS endorsed the April meat boycott. Representative William Cotter introduced into the *Congressional Record* the culinary sensation sweeping the nation: the Virginia Citizens Consumer Council's "one week meatless menu," starring lentil soup, macaroni, tuna fish casserole, and, for Sunday dinner, "lasagna without meat." Fast-food executives discussed selling "soybean burgers." A Cleveland judge set bond at three thousand dollars for a man accused of stealing seventy-seven pounds of sirloin from a restaurant, and lectured that "this should be a warning to the public generally that society will not countenance the stealing of meat, which is more precious than jewels."

Like this was the Soviet Union or something.

The White House, growing desperate, sent word through the first lady's press secretary that the Nixons were eating more leftovers and fresh vegetables: "They like zucchini a lot." A chain of thirteen stores in the Washington area announced they would shut down for a day in solidarity against Nixon's glib inaction. Three days later, a thirty-six-store Massachusetts chain joined them. The prices for cattle and pork belly futures started plummeting. A Dubuque, Iowa, packing company curtailed operations.

The president tried a televised speech, turning to a rhetorical formula that used to work: self-pity and patriotic bromides:

"Good evening: Four years and two months ago, when I first came into this office as president, by far the most difficult problem confronting the nation was the seemingly endless war in Vietnam." He ended it. "Hundreds were being held as prisoners of war." He brought them home. He then quoted one of them, Colonel George McKnight, who had told him, "Thank you for bringing us home on our feet instead of our knees." Only then did he bring up inflation—as "one of the most terrible costs of war," framing a logic that those who did not patriotically endure it dishonored warriors' heroic sacrifices. He mentioned a policy intervention—a price ceiling on beef, pork, and lamb—then concluded, as he had every big TV speech since "Checkers" in 1952, with a sentimental allegory: "A few days ago, in this room, I talked to a man who had spent almost eight years in a Communist prison camp in North Vietnam. For over four years he was in solitary confinement. In that four-year-period he never saw and never talked to another human being except his Communist captors. He lived on two meals a day, usually just a piece of bread."

You could stop eating meat for two days. But wouldn't you be dishonoring *him*?

It didn't work. More people boycotted than the organizers dared dream. The *Chicago Tribune* found 85 percent support, and 50 percent fewer meat sales—and 25 percent more business at a place called the "Green Planet Health Food Restaurant" on Lincoln Avenue. Sales were down 80 percent in some parts of New York City. Another new movement the American people learned about that week was the "Gray Panthers": old people were "ready to be radicalized," their leader insisted. "I'm just serving warning." She singled out the high cost of food as one of the reasons. A frustrated, defiant Nixon served roast prime tenderloin of beef—"selling in San Clemente markets,'" Walter Cronkite reported, "for upwards of three dollars a pound"—at a dinner for South Vietnamese strongman Nguyen Van Thieu.

Time put "Food Prices: The Big Beef" on the cover April 2; it hadn't yet run a cover on Watergate. Seventeen percent of the country hadn't even heard yet of the scandal; of those who had, only a third thought it was a serious thing.

The Silent Majority might be ignoring Watergate. The sense that something was rotten in Washington spread nonetheless. "I've never protested anything before," a new insurgent told the *Tribune*. But now that the price of bologna had risen 40 percent, she was ready to start. Rumor had it that the summer might bring gas rationing. In Atlanta, a witness in a prostitution case complained to the federal Price Control Board that the fee for sexual services had leaped from $25 to $35. The price of onions started soaring, too. Horse meat, slide rules, a world in which anything that reliably had cost one dollar might soon suddenly cost two: it did something to people.

Crime, meanwhile, was becoming a national obsession—the upcoming TV season would have ten cops-and-robbers shows, a record—and crime had begun getting stranger. On New Year's Eve, a twenty-three-year-old black veteran named Mark James Essex, who lived in a New Orleans shack spray-painted with slogans like "My *Destiny* lies in the BLOODY *DEATH* of Racist PIGS," shot three policemen. Two weeks

later—to kick off the revolution, he said—he began massacring white guests at a downtown Howard Johnson's. Two dozen policemen opened fire on someone they believed to be the perpetrator. They actually were shooting at each other. They didn't know that Essex had already been machine-gunned to shreds by a Marine combat helicopter—also live on TV.

Toward the end of January what the *New York Times* described as "a two-day ordeal of blazing gunfights, death, and terror at a Brooklyn sporting goods store" ended in a daring roof escape of nine people held hostage by four gunmen identifying themselves as "servants of Allah": "O Muslims!" went their manifesto. "Unite against the oppressive infidels whose aim is the destruction of Islam." At the end of February, activists of the American Indian Movement seized the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, site of the last massacre of the nineteenth-century Indian wars. Set upon by federal marshals, they staged an armed standoff that lasted nine weeks. Two Indians died from sniper fire. A marshal was paralyzed from a gunshot wound. (At the Academy Awards ceremony, in solidarity, Marlon Brando sent a Native American woman named Sacheen Littlefeather to accept the Best Actor award on his behalf.) Black September, the terrorists responsible for the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, stormed the Saudi Arabian embassy in Khartoum, Sudan, demanding the release of Sirhan Sirhan, the Palestinian assassin of Robert F. Kennedy, and murdered two U.S. diplomats.

Two days later, a massive *New York Times* front-page story featured someone named Ted Patrick, who made a living "deprogramming" young people snatched from religious communes and cults. "They are worse than the Manson sect because he had only a small number of followers," Patrick claimed. "If authorities don't do something about this, our nation is going to be controlled by a handful of people." They were groups like the "Children of God," whose members "regard all existing social structures as corrupt and show their '100 percent discipleship' by surrendering their worldly goods to the organization." The liberal National Council of Churches, the umbrella organization for mainstream denominations like the Methodists, said it found "nothing bizarre, coercive, or secretive" about such "high-demand religious groups, of which there are hundreds." The ACLU called what Patrick did "criminal acts of abduction." A defiant parent replied he would stick with Patrick and kidnap his kid back nonetheless: "if they want to put me in jail, I'll go to jail." A deprogrammed disciple said if it hadn't been for Patrick, "I'd still be under the mental control of these people."

March was also the month when it seemed as if every other local official was headed to jail. Miami's mayor was indicted for conspiracy to bribe a judge to free a convicted drug offender. The circuit court judge who had dismissed the case was indicted, too. Another Miami judge was indicted for taking a bribe to free a child molester. New York State released a report on "systematic and organized burglaries, larcenies, and thefts" by Albany police. New Orleans's district attorney, Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorist Jim Garrison, was about to go on trial for playing footsie with pinball companies. In Maryland's lower legislative chamber, a delegate was arrested for conspiring to distribute forty pounds of heroin. A Queens assistant district attorney was indicted for shutting down the investigation of a Ponzi scheme whose victims included his own son-in-law, and was under suspicion for ignoring two gruesome gangland slayings. A former Philadelphia city commissioner got six years for contract kickbacks; a former chairman of the city planning board was sentenced for selling bank stock below market value to political pals. That capped off a three-year period in the City of Brotherly Love in which a judge went to jail for check fraud, the housing authority advisory board chairman went down for bribery, the stadium construction coordinator went to jail for extortion, and a former chief court clerk got two-to-ten for robbery. Former Illinois governor Otto Kerner was on his way to jail for kickbacks from a racetrack owner, and one of Chicago mayor Richard Daley's right-hand men cut a deal for the provisioning of voting machines that profited him $187,000—and then a three-year jail term. A Republican alderman was on the way to a bribery conviction that could earn him eighty-six years in jail. "Over the past three years in New Jersey alone," observed *Time*, "sixty-seven officials have been indicted and thirty-five convicted"—mayors, legislators, judges, highway officials, postmasters, and a congressman.

And then there was Washington, D.C., where on April 4 came the next turn of the Watergate screw.

CHAPTER FOUR

Executive Privilege

OFFICIAL WASHINGTON HAD ALWAYS BEEN A LITTLE NERVOUS AT THE president's appointment of L. Patrick Gray as acting director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation: he was a Nixon loyalist in a position that was supposed to be nonpolitical. In his Judiciary Committee confirmation hearings, Democrats began grilling him on an even more worrisome matter: allegations that he had cooperated with White House attempts to interfere with the Watergate investigation. Nixon tried to put the matter to rest by giving senators a chance to look at the investigation's records—but only for a half hour each day. John Dean had received unlimited access to those selfsame records; Donald Segretti, the young prankster who had traveled the country in 1972 sabotaging Democratic campaigns, had been shown records of the investigation on him by Gray, too. What was supposed to have been a routine hearing turned into the Senate's first Watergate inquisition.

The name of the president's personal lawyer and the campaign's chief fund-raiser, Herbert Kalmbach, came up: he had been ordered to pay Segretti's salary by presidential appointment secretary Dwight Chapin. John Dean's name kept coming up, too: what did it mean that he had apparently been the one to hire G. Gordon Liddy in the first place?

Meanwhile, what the *New York Times* called "a little-understood and seemingly mundane issue called 'executive privilege'"—by which the president claimed that the Constitution's doctrine of separation of powers kept him or his staff from providing any information requested by Congress involving his conduct of office—was sending Sam Ervin through the roof: "Divine right went out with the American Revolution and doesn't belong to White House aides," he said. "That is not executive privilege. It is executive poppycock." He added that if the president would not allow aides to testify under oath voluntarily, he himself would force them to do so under pain of arrest.

On April 4, Pat Gray withdrew from consideration as acting FBI chief. WOR radio in New York called it the "first blood Congress has

drawn in the Watergate affair." *Time* called it the president's biggest setback since 1970. The magazine also featured a fawning profile of "Watergate Prober Sam Ervin," whose impending inquiry "could easily lead to the most fascinating Capitol Hill TV drama since the Army-McCarthy hearings of 1954." Not quite what the president wanted to hear.

AT LEAST ALL THE POWS NOW WERE HOME. THAT MEANT ANOTHER round of patriotic festivities. In Washington, Captain Jeremiah Denton and soon-to-be-admiral James Stockdale were awarded the Navy's John Paul Jones Award for Inspirational Leadership; Denton sobbed openly. Portsmouth, Virginia, only recently the site of a bloody desegregation brawl, honored native son Fred Cherry, who not incidentally was black, with a parade featuring eight brass bands. He told the assembly, "I do not regret one moment in North Vietnam."

Because all the prisoners were released, the stricture that had prevented them from describing their captivity was lifted. They began sitting at press conferences to describe their awful ordeal. The front pages of conservative heartland newspapers from Fredericksburg, Virginia, to Spokane, Washington, featured a serialized Associated Press interview with Jeremiah Denton—the POW, editors reminded readers, who had "stepped to the microphones and, in a moment the nation will long remember . . . said, 'God bless America'"—under headlines such as "I WAS LIKE A CRIPPLED ROACH" and "PRAYERS HELPED DENTON ENDURE TORTURE." The UPI ran a competing series from Air Force Major Charles Boyd. The right-leaning weekly *U.S. News & World Report* gave thirteen pages to an account from Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain, son of the former chief of naval operations in the Pacific. He said, "I admire President Nixon's courage . . . he had to take the most unpopular decisions that I could imagine—the mining, the blockade, the bombing." (Actually, according to polls, these actions were popular.) He added, "In the context of history, Watergate will be a very minor item as compared with the other achievements of this administration." And he enthused, "I see more of an appreciation of our way of life. There is more patriotism. The flag is all over the place."

Their stories: downed fliers with cracked vertebrae and shattered ankle sockets, facing villagers seeking to tear them limb from limb, led to prison camps with overflowing toilet buckets, maggot-ridden rice, bones set without anesthesia, and solitary confinement in cold cement rooms for months at a time. They did not know whether they would ever see another American again. Then men furtively glimpsed shadows through cracks in walls, found notes marked on toilet paper

with matchsticks, read legends like GOD WILL FIND STRENGTH. ROBINSON RISNER, SEPTEMBER 18, 1965 scrawled upon bare stone walls—and eventually someone remembered the "tap code" used by Korean War POWs ("Joan Baez Sucks" was one of the first successful messages). Through such glancing communication they were able to reestablish a full-fledged military chain of command—the "4th Combined POW Wing," they called it—to enforce the code of conduct the military established for prisoners of war after several Korean War prisoners defected to the Communists. Its central tenets included: "If I am captured I will make every effort to escape and aid others to escape. . . . I will accept neither parole nor special favors from the enemy. . . . I will make no oral or written statements disloyal to my country or harmful to their cause."

Out of suffering, Americans learned, they devised a miraculous sort of makeshift civilization. Then their captors, cruel Oriental despots with names like "The Bug" ("a psychotic torturer, one of the worst fiends that we had to deal with") and "Zorba" (a hideously incompetent doctor) and "The Cat" ("a dapper and effeminate intellectual"), sought to crush it, punishing with torture captives who maintained their status as proud American fighting men. So these stout-hearted men fought back by taking actions that invited *more* torture. "We now began to lie on the railroad tracks," Denton explained at his April 1 press conference. "We forced them to be brutal to us." Welcoming torture, enduring it, absorbing it, was how they proved their mettle as warriors.

Camp griots memorized the name of every prisoner they heard of, passing on stories of valor from cell to cell and camp to camp: legends upon which to build a resistance. "Everybody says we had nothing to do," one of the returnees explained. "But we did have something to do . . . resist the North Vietnamese attempts to exploit us . . . the only weapons were our bodies and our pain." Resistance, the more futile the better, became the way they gave meaning to their lives.

"How the POWs Fought Back," *U.S. News* headlined McCain's essay. "Fighting back" was the way, as Captain James Mulligan said, "we walked out of Hanoi as winners." In time the "we" became collective, expanding out to encompass the nation—which hadn't really lost the war at all. The POWs' survival proved it.

Nixon spent more and more time working on Operation Homecoming, precisely in proportion to his mounting Watergate troubles. He fiddled with the prose of a presidential proclamation and the design for a POW medal; he micromanaged the sending of corsages to all the POWs' wives (he specified the name and the address of the florist in Hawaii) and the planning for a White House gala on May 24. "They could

have a great impact on the destiny of this country," he explained to an aide on April 11, the day the *Washington Post's* lead story was "Mitchell Aide Got $70,000 of Bug Fund," and an arrest of twenty-one youths went down in Cincinnati "when a policeman noticed marijuana smoke 'hanging over the neighborhood like a cloud. . . . There was marijuana fudge in the oven. They were boiling marijuana on the stove in tea bags and they had some burning in the fireplace. It was going up the chimney and we could smell it all over the neighborhood.'"

It was also baseball's opening day. A POW named Charlie Plumb threw out the first pitch at the new Royals Stadium in Kansas City. He had prayed silently from the pitcher's mound: "Dear God, help me put this one down the chute." He fired a strike, and felt as if the ovation that followed lifted the stadium three feet off the ground. Here was the sort of veneration reserved for saviors: men whose suffering might wash away a nation's sins.

THE SUSPICIOUS CIRCLES REMAINED APPALLED BY OPERATION HOMECOMING. The American Psychological Association on April 11 put out a statement complaining that the POWs had been exploited "in an elaborate drama staged to provide justification for the President's policy, to create the illusion of victory and to arouse a sense of patriotic fervor." The *New York Times* reported on a citizen's inquiry into Vietnam war crimes in which a witness recalled seeing an Army major gun down thirty-three women, children, and old men from his helicopter. Jane Fonda went on the news in Los Angeles: "The condition of the returning prisoners should speak for itself to prove the men have not been tortured," she said. "I think the only way that we are going to redeem ourselves as a country for what we have done there is not to hail the pilots as heroes, because they are hypocrites and liars." And wasn't it suspicious that the prisoners who most vociferously claimed torture were the ones with the highest military rank? "We have no reason to believe that U.S. Air Force officers tell the truth," she said. "They are professional killers." It made her persona non grata in places like Georgia, where the showing of her movies was outlawed. In 1973, the Maryland Legislature proposed what would have been the first bill of attainder in its history to ban Fonda from the state and grant the government power to seize all money made from her films. "I wouldn't go so far as to execute her, but I think we should cut her tongue off," one legislator argued.

But plenty of ordinary Americans thought what she said made sense. They could point to the constant affirmations of Pentagon spokes-

men all through February and March of the "obvious good physical health" of the returnees, that they evinced only "a few instances of mild situation adjustment problems which required family counseling." They could point out the absurdity of Nixon and his supporters' justification for the "Christmas bombings": if it had been done to free the prisoners, what to make, then, of the fact that the bombings themselves *created* more POWs than had been captured in the years 1969, 1970, and 1971 combined?

And they could point out, in the face of the orgy of jingoistic discourse about an enemy whose cruelty knew no bounds, that however ugly the treatment of American POWs might have been, the treatment of prisoners by our South Vietnamese allies was exponentially worse. "The contrast... between our happy and apparently healthy POWs and the 'grotesque sculptures of scarred flesh and gnarled limbs' who have been 'politically reeducated' by Mr. Thieu," a *Time* letter writer said, "might make one more prayer of thanksgiving in order: 'Dear God, thank you for allowing me to be captured by the enemy, and not by the friends I was sent to fight for.'"

BEHIND THE DEBATE LAY EXTRAORDINARY COMPLEXITY. THE PHILOSOPHER Alistair Horne has written, "It is one of the most difficult things in this world to establish the truth about torture; whether it did or did not take place, and the nature and scale of it." No torturer, in the centuries-long annals of the practice, ever admits that what he is doing is torture, and the North Vietnamese were no exception: they saw the way they treated their prisoners as a quasi-juridical attempt to prosecute criminals—"air pirates"—violating the Geneva Conventions. At the same time, "The plaintiff is as unlikely to tell the unadorned truth as his oppressor; for [to credibly claim torture] is so superlative a propaganda weapon given into his hands."

That weapon was deployed by the U.S. government constantly, in its claim that the enemy's torture was world-historically cruel. It was not. The tormenters themselves had learned their techniques from the French, as captives in the very prisons they now commanded. Jeremiah Denton demonstrated them in photographs that accompanied his series of AP interviews: suspension upside down for hours at a time; solitary confinement lasting months or even years—and what the POWs called the "rope trick," which in the Spanish Inquisition was known as the *corda* and celebrated as "the queen of torments," and which reappeared in the twenty-first century in the American prison at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.

The complexity was compounded by conflicts within the POW community itself. North Vietnam was a war-ravaged nation struggling to throw off what it saw as a barbarian invasion, to heal the humiliation of death from the skies, to rouse its collective will to defeat a much more powerful adversary (which, by all accounts, North Vietnam did extraordinarily well). That required a tool of modern statecraft: propaganda. A surrendered, humiliated enemy saying exactly what the regime wanted him to say was the most powerful propaganda tool they possessed. Reason enough for any loyal, self-respecting American flier to resist, and to understand his own resistance as a contribution to military victory. But the queen of torments could not be resisted for long—even the most macho top gun soon learned that. Which introduced complications.

As soon as the enemy's enhanced interrogation methods became systematic, the ranking POWs devised ways to adjust the draconian strictures of their Code of Conduct and still be able to live with themselves. The first loosening, put out by tap code by Denton late in 1965, allowed soldiers to give the minimum of cooperation required to make it stop once they couldn't stand it anymore. In time the allowances became more elaborate—a bizarre efflorescence of high military bureaucracy in dank concrete cells, complete with a Pentagon-style acronym, "BACK US." One bright line: prisoners were never allowed to confess to crimes. This was war. The torture room was an extension of the battlefield. Americans would walk out of Hanoi as winners—so long as they mustered the heroic will never, ever, to confess crimes.

And within the camps, that doctrine set off an American civil war.

A flier named Richard Stratton reasoned that making up some harmless confession was preferable to making a substantive confession after passing out from pain. So he let himself be filmed making one so absurd the North Vietnamese were humiliated around the world when they released the film. Stratton considered that a victory. His "commanding officers" called it treason—defiance of a direct military order. So they issued another: ostracize Stratton. Some prisoners judged that too nonsensical to take seriously. So two camps evolved, pragmatists and hard-liners. The pragmatists called the hard-liners zombies and masochists. Some became friends with their guards. But such indiscipline shook the very foundation of the hard-liners' self-esteem, built under the most trying circumstances imaginable. And by 1968, a place that was represented five years later as an example of simple, stout-hearted American patriotism began displaying the same recriminatory divisions as the society from which it emerged.

Then a new generation of prisoners began arriving in the camps,

ones who agreed with the new arguments back home about the war's illegality and futility. "There's no glory or honor in Vietnam," a crusty old colonel told one of them, Edison Miller, a promising young flier being groomed for general and shot down in 1967. "Don't go over there and get your ass killed because that's a lousy stinking war." Some were not fliers at all: they were grunts. And while fliers wore clean socks and punched buttons at thirty thousand feet, and were career officers whose military honor (or simple career ambition) protected them from doubt, ground pounders knew enough to consider the war a shameful waste from their personal experience alone.

And then, in 1969, for reasons never quite understood, something else occurred to unmoor the hard-liners' carefully wrought identity as warriors: torture inexplicably stopped, never to return. Solitary confinement ended, too. Prisoners now inhabited a single communal jail, and its exercise yard included a basketball hoop, Ping-Pong table, pool, and communal barbecue pit—one reason the POWs returned looking so hale and hearty. For the hard-liners, there was no more war to give meaning to their suffering. So they invented superfluous occasions for conflict. When their captors limited church services to eight men at a time, for example, they went on a two-day hunger strike, bellowing choruses of "The Star Spangled Banner" all the while. For the anti–hard-liners—especially the Army GIs who'd been captured by the Vietcong and held in Spartan camps in the South Vietnamese jungle, and considered the "Hanoi Hilton" a comparative paradise—the John Wayne sound-alikes attempting to instill military discipline became outright enemies. Some declared loyalty to the antiwar movement. On Mother's Day 1970, Edison Miller released a statement to the world: "Today America's mothers must face the fact that their sons are killing fellow human beings and destroying foreign countries for an unjust cause, making our actions not only illegal but immoral." Then he made a tape with another antiwar POW, Navy Commander Robert Schweitzer, arguing there was no need to follow the Code of Conduct because it didn't apply in an illegal war. They began organizing their fellows into a "Peace Committee." The gossamer simulacrum of good military order assembled by a valorous band of brothers disintegrated into an undisciplined chaos. Their "Battle of Hanoi" was being lost—by the enemy within. They themselves had said unpatriotic things over North Vietnamese radio, but only under torture. People like Miller (who argued that one of the reasons he was so hated was that he had stood up to torture *better* than they) did so voluntarily. His adversaries were men who had been racked by years of guilty sleepless nights for the simple act of giving their torturers more than

their name, rank, and serial number—and feared they would be court-martialed upon their return for doing only that. At that thought, some ambitious spit-and-polish career officers seemed to snap.

Jim Stockdale had been flying his fighter-bomber over the Gulf of Tonkin on August 2, 1964, when he witnessed the fact that the attack by which Lyndon Johnson created the pretext to begin the Vietnam War had not actually taken place at all. After he was shot down he came to understand this knowledge as enforcing upon him an overwhelming and awesome patriotic duty: to stand up to torture so manfully that the enemy could never extract from him the secret that would shame the United States in the eyes of the world. As his Congressional Medal of Honor citation explained, "He deliberately inflicted a near-mortal wound to his person in order to convince his captors of his willingness to give up his life rather than capitulate"—the first and only Medal of Honor awarded for a suicide attempt. He drew up new "Command Goals" that put constructing a coherent, heroic story upon their return—and debunking the stories told by the traitors—at its center. (They still sent their messages in code, which now concluded, "RWHSWDGBU!"—"Release with honor, stick with Dick, God bless you!")

After the Christmas bombings, the Peace Committee released a New Year's statement: "We strongly appeal to the members of Congress to exercise all your legal and moral power to bring about peace. . . . This statement is made by those who know that more delay can only increase the suffering, lengthen our confinement, and aggravate the well-being of the country which we serve."

At that, a hard-liner named Theodore Guy, calling their message "insubordination on the battlefield," drew up a military plan to "liquidate them."

Then they finally all arrived home. That freed hard-liners like John McCain and Jeremiah Denton to tell their stories. And Peace Committee members like Walter Wilber to tell theirs. He went on *60 Minutes* and asked what was wrong about saying the same things about the Vietnam War that senators like Ted Kennedy and Majority Leader Mike Mansfield did. He called it a matter of patriotism: "Because I'm a military officer doesn't reduce my citizenship rights a bit; in fact it just *emphasizes* them. . . . I *do* believe the First Amendment—the right to free speech—applies wherever I am in the world." A twenty-seven-year-old POW named John Young said, "I was an American first, and I decided it was my duty to speak out."

But two of the hard-liners believed it was *their* duty to put men like

this American in jail. One of the accusers was Ted Guy, the one who had to be talked down from shooting them "on the battlefield." The other was James Bond Stockdale. He had been shocked at his inability to find anyone at the Pentagon who thought the Code of Conduct was even a legally enforceable document. How, he asked incredulously, had the government abandoned its own military code? Since the military brass wouldn't be doing any courts-martial, Guy and Stockdale took advantage of a provision that let them initiate proceedings themselves.

For a White House worried about military recruitment now that the draft had ended, desperate to put the divisions of Vietnam behind it, this new outbreak of the old civil wars over Vietnam was a headache indeed. In fact, on the same day the *Post* headlined "Mitchell Aide Got $70,000 of Bug Fund," the political dilemma of POW against POW became the subject of an intense Oval Office meeting—alongside another Vietnam issue that threatened to become even worse.

A SCENE FOR A FLY—OR A BUG—ON THE WALL OF THE OVAL OFFICE ON April 11.

Roger Shields, the Pentagon official running Operation Homecoming, listened patiently as the president unfurled his idea to deploy POW "superstars" like John McCain in an "indoctrination program" to sell the new all-volunteer armed forces: "It's like a producer putting on a great play or a great movie. You have a hell of a bunch of stars in this one. It's an all-star cast—even the bit players. . . . Oh, I know the service line is, well, you gotta treat the Admiral's son just like, ah, the son of the enlisted man. That's crap . . . they must be used in an effective way."

A starry-eyed thirty-three-year-old in the Oval Office for the first time, Shields gingerly attempted to change the subject.

"Mr. President, I, I—"

Mr. President interrupted him, riffing on.

"It's particularly important because the euphoria doesn't last forever . . . we can't let the, the fervent, uh, feeling that these men have, that there are things for them to do, ah, be dissipated . . . we've got to use them correctly."

Shields abandoned the attempt, going with the flow of his commander in chief. People tended to do that in the Oval Office. The president was going on about the "pitiful left-wing and media" people accusing Operation Homecoming of being staged when Shields ventured a second attempt: "We knew that there were, ah, some problems, a few problems with regard to misconduct."

"Sure."

Shields then explained why the landings of the Freedom Birds had been staged the way they had, with one senior officer on each plane as tarmac spokesman: because frank exchanges between reporters and prisoners might reveal the civil war that had transpired in the camps. But the president did not seem to have the stomach for the discussion. It had been a difficult day. He recollected, fondly, Galan Kramer's homemade banner reading GOD BLESS AMERICA & NIXON. Then, finally, he changed the subject to a politically sensitive press conference Shields was giving the next day, the topic Shields had been trying discuss in the first place.

"You, ah, incidentally, you are working on the MIA, talking to our—"

"That's correct."

"To the extent you can."

"That's correct."

"The, ah, the main thing there, of course, is to just—let it be known that these bastards probably aren't going to come out with anything. Ah, we have got to make an enormous effort in the public relations sense as well as to what we do, ah, as I'm sure you know."

He was referring, in his awkward, vague way, to a bill come due from an extraordinary act of official deception. Operation Homecoming had returned 587 American prisoners of war—but for years Nixon had referred to 1,600 Americans being held in North Vietnam. That number folded in more than one thousand personnel, mostly pilots, who crashed in the dense Vietnamese brush and in previous wars would have been classed as "Killed in Action/Body Not Recovered"—but had been reclassified as "MIA" so the president could make the North Vietnamese look bad for his Paris negotiations. Now the families of those other 1,013 were making insistent noises: what was the government going to do about *them*?

The Operation Homecoming statements by the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff included the promise that "we will not rest until all those still known captive are safe and until we have achieved the best possible accounting for those missing in action." Holding the government to that pledge had now become the raison d'être of the National League of Families of American Prisoners of War and Missing in Southeast Asia, the organization that had taken off as a White House front group. VIVA was still selling bracelets hand over fist—now bearing the names of MIAs. It had even come up with a new flag honoring them: a forlorn, gaunt, hangdog flat-topped silhouette, barbed wire and a guard tower in the background, a military laurel, and the legend POW-MIA: YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN. Soon it adorned Vet-

erans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts across the land. On March 30 the brigadier general who supervised the release announced he "did not rule out the possibility that some Americans may still be held in Laos." The commander of the "4th Combined POW Wing," in a spirit of political hardball, told the press, "I am gratified that our nation appears prepared to follow through on comprehensive plans to account for those who are still missing in action." Chicago MIA families were now saying that the administration was "abandoning" men "seen in photos coming out of Indochina or who have been reported alive by returning POWs." It was one more aspect of the Americans' lunatic semiology that baffled hapless Communist officials. "We have not come this far," one declared in exasperation at being once more enjoined to "prove" they held no more prisoners, "to hold on to a handful of Americans, after all what would that prove?" The issue was a godforsaken mess.

And there was another Southeast Asia mess: Cambodia. As late as 1970 Nixon's excuse for dropping bombs on the neutral nation had been that it was necessary to protect the retreat of American ground forces from South Vietnam. But now it was April 1973, the boys were back home, and B-52s were still dropping 24,000 tons a month. Secretary of State William Rogers told Congress it "was justified because the continued presence of North Vietnamese troops in Cambodia threatened the right of self-determination in Vietnam." That was surreal, considering that the Paris Peace Accords we had just signed allowed 145,000 North Vietnamese troops to garrison *inside* South Vietnam. Another excuse arose: Communist communications lines in the countryside had to be intercepted. So why, the suspicious circles asked, were bombs falling on the country's most heavily populated areas?

Another mess was domestic. As part of his plan to dismantle as much of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society as he could, Nixon had hired a thirty-two-year-old right-wing activist named Howard Phillips, ostensibly to "run" the Office of Economic Opportunity—but actually to take the agency apart piece by piece. And on April 11, a federal judge ruled on what the *Washington Post* called "the most brazen usurpation of the powers of Congress and as crass an assault on its prerogatives as we can imagine": that if the president let Howard Phillips continue to dismember OEO, he "would be clothing the President with a power entirely to control the legislation of Congress, and paralyze the administration of justice."

And then there was Watergate—of which Attorney General Richard Kleindienst had just testified before Congress, defending Richard

Nixon's novel doctrine of executive privilege in a way that drove senators insane.

"The Congress has no power at all to command testimony from the executive departments?" asked Senator Edmund Muskie, the object of the worst Watergate dirty tricks during the 1972 presidential campaign season.

Replied Kleindienst, "If the President of the United States so directs."

"Do we have the right to command you to testify against the will of the President?"

"If the President directs me not to appear, I am not going to appear."

"Does that apply to every appointee of the Executive Branch?"

"I'd have to say that is correct." And if Congress did not like that, Kleindienst continued, it could "cut off our funds, abolish most of what we can do, or impeach the president."

Senator Ervin, startled, followed up: how could an impeachment take place if none of the president's men could be compelled to supply facts? Kleindienst's answer was chilling and strange: "You don't need facts to impeach a president."

Republicans and Democrats both fumed that they had never heard senators addressed like that in their chamber. A Harvard constitutional law expert called Kleindienst's claims "utterly ridiculous." A Yale professor said they "can't hold water." Democratic senator Lawton Chiles of Florida said it sounded "so unreal that I wondered if it was really me—if I hadn't parted from my senses." The chair of the House Republican Conference, John Anderson of Illinois, said it "borders on contempt for the established law of the land." A Pennsylvania Democrat called it "monarchical or totalitarian."

King Richard: just like Senator Ervin said. And now Ervin, with his investigatory committee already meeting in closed session, was in a position to do something about it, threatening subpoenas: "I don't like the surgeon's knife, but sometimes a cancer comes—a cancer that has to be eradicated the same way."

THE WATERGATE GRAND JURY RE-IMPANELED, SUPPOSEDLY IN SECRET, but leaking like a sieve: that James McCord had testified that E. Howard Hunt's wife (who had died in a plane crash the previous December with $10,000 in crisp hundred-dollar bills in her purse) was a conduit for bribes to the Watergate defendants; that John Mitchell had received the transcripts from the bugs at Democratic headquarters; that Mitchell, Dean, Colson, and Magruder were active participants in obstructing the

Watergate investigation; that G. Gordon Liddy had made a detailed presentation in Attorney General Mitchell's office, including charts, graphs, and a multimillion-dollar budget, about how the Nixon reelection campaign could spy on and sabotage Democratic presidential campaigns.

John Mitchell was spotted at the White House—perhaps strategizing about how to handle the rumored indictment?

On April 17, the president, looking haggard and tense, read three minutes' worth of lawyerly words on TV from a sheaf of typescript in the White House briefing room. He claimed that a month earlier, on March 21, "as a result of serious charges which came to my attention," he "began intensive new inquiries" into Watergate. He claimed "major developments . . . concerning which it would be improper to be more specific now, except to say that real progress has been made in finding the truth." He expected "all government employees and especially White House staff employees" to cooperate "in this matter." He concluded, "I condemn any attempts to cover up in this case, no matter who was involved."

Then he absented the room. Young Ronald Ziegler, his spokesman, took over. The former skipper on the "Jungle Cruise" attraction at Disneyland was pressed about all the contradictions between the president's new statement and his previous ones.

There was no contradiction, Ziegler said, because the previous ones had been based on "investigations prior to the president's action."

The reporters kept pressing him, question after question after question. On the eighteenth query, he uttered the immortal words: "This is the operative statement. The others are inoperative."

Time magazine helpfully catalogued what statements were now "inoperative":

The White House's claim that what had happened at the Watergate on June 17, 1972, was merely "a third-rate burglary attempt"; the claim of Attorney General Kleindienst on August 28, 1972, of "the most extensive, thorough, and comprehensive investigation since the assassination of President Kennedy"; the president's reassurances the next day that his counsel John Dean had carried out an investigation on his behalf, such that he could now "say categorically . . . that no one in this administration, presently employed, was involved in this very bizarre incident"; his statement the next day that while "overzealous people in campaigns do things that are wrong," "what really hurts is if you try to cover it up," and that he himself wanted the guilty to be prosecuted "as soon as possible"; his campaign manager's October 16 avowal that the *Washington Post* had "maliciously sought to give the appearance of a

direct connection between the White House and the Watergate, a charge which the *Post* knows—and a half-dozen investigations have found—to be false"; three days later, the promise of the campaign's deputy director Jeb Magruder that "when this is all over, you'll know that there were only seven people who knew about the Watergate, and they are the seven who were indicted by the grand jury"; then the president's statement that he had "absolute and total confidence" in John Dean's 1972 investigation; and John Mitchell's statement on March 29 that claims he had known about the burglary beforehand were "slanderous and false."

All, apparently, inoperative.

The president went into seclusion for the next thirteen days. On the fifth day a Gallup poll was released. It found that 41 percent of Americans believed Richard Nixon knew about the bugging plans before they were carried out. The next issue of *Time* summarized the state of knowledge: that the June 1972 burglary "has been revealed as clearly part of a far broader campaign of political espionage designed to give Nixon an unfair, illegal—and unnecessary—advantage in his reelection drive. It was financed with secret campaign funds, contributed in cash by anonymous donors and never fully accounted for, in violation of the law. Then, after the arrests in the Watergate break-in, the same funds were used to persuade most of them to plead guilty and keep quiet about any higher involvement." *Time* concluded that the "scandal was rapidly emerging as probably the most pervasive instance of top-level misconduct in history." A high official at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue reported the mood in the West Wing: "It's like the last days in a Berlin bunker in 1945. They're all sitting there waiting for the bombs to drop."

Word was there would be another presidential announcement, this one the evening before May Day. Perhaps the bombs would drop then.

CHAPTER FIVE

"A Whale of a Good Cheerleader"

IT SEEMED THAT BY APRIL 30 RICHARD NIXON HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO say something about Watergate: six Republican senators said they would not run for reelection unless he did. Young men who last month bestrode Washington like colossi were hiring lawyers under threat of indictment, leaking accusations against colleagues, writing messages on legal pads rather than speaking them aloud—who knew whether their offices, too, were bugged?

New outrages compounded daily. John Mitchell contradicted his own previous sworn testimony. Deputy campaign manager Jeb Stuart Magruder told investigators he had passed transcripts from Democratic National Committee phone bugs to the Oval Office. Chief of staff H. R. "Bob" Haldeman and domestic affairs counselor John Ehrlichman, the president's two closest advisors, had hired criminal representation. A young staffer named Kenneth Reitz had quit his job running the 1974 congressional campaigns after it was revealed he'd run a spy shop within the Youth Division of the Committee to Re-elect the President. Pat Gray resigned from the FBI altogether after the shocking admission that he had mishandled Watergate evidence from the safe of E. Howard Hunt, which ended up in an FBI "burn bag"—containers in which sensitive materials were destroyed. The evidence, allegedly, included forged cables meant to frame John F. Kennedy for the assassination of South Vietnam's president Ngo Dinh Diem; a spy dossier on Ted Kennedy; and a memo on Hunt's meetings with a lobbyist linked to bribes paid to Nixon by International Telephone & Telegraph. Reporters unearthed a new private treasury of $600,000 to finance dirty tricks—like the thousands of copies of the *Washington Post* the White House bought, then shredded, to fake votes in a poll on whether or not the president was doing the right thing in Vietnam. "I don't know why any citizen should ever again believe anything a government official says," one White House staffer told *Time*.

Then, the staggering news at the Los Angeles trial of Daniel Ellsberg,

the defense intellectual who leaked the Pentagon Papers, that on September 3, 1971, Hunt and Liddy had overseen a break-in at the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist. The burglars spoke "Cuban-style Spanish." They worked for a unit of the White House, America now learned, referred to internally as the "Plumbers."

A newsweekly quoted a White House staffer: "Don't let your incredulity factor get too high—there's more to come." A distinguished British journalist published an op-ed in the *Times* calling the United States a "banana republic." Theodore White announced he was extending his deadline for *Making of the President 1972;* he needed to add a new chapter on Watergate. It grew harder to entertain the notion that the president had simply been above it all.

And so he left his seclusion and, American flag peeking from behind his right shoulder, American flag pin ornamenting his lapel, a bust of Abraham Lincoln and a picture of his family beside him, explained how he was cleansing the rot.

He began, as he always did, on a maudlin note: "I want to talk to you tonight"—*pause*—"from my heart." He outlined the problem: several of his closest aides, including "some of my most trusted friends," had been accused of illegal activity in the 1972 presidential election. "The inevitable result of these charges has been to raise serious questions about the integrity of the White House itself."

He claimed he himself had learned about the break-in: from news reports while "in Florida trying to get a few days' rest after my visit to Moscow." (A bid for pity: he had been working hard, making peace.) He said he had been appalled, ordering an internal investigation about whether members of his administration were involved, and "received repeated assurances that they were not." And it was only because of those assurances from people he trusted, he said, that "I discounted stories in the press that *appeared*"—he emphasized the word—"to implicate members of my administration and other members of the campaign committee."

Then he elaborated on what he had claimed two weeks earlier: that on March 21 new information convinced him he had been deceived. He addressed the audience directly: "There had been an effort to conceal the facts both from the public—from *you*—and from me." So he ordered a new investigation, reporting "directly to me, *right here in this office*." Those not cooperating would be forced to resign.

Then came the lead for the next day's news stories: "Today, in one of the most difficult decisions of my presidency, I accepted the resignation of two of my closest associates in the White House, Bob Halde-

man, John Ehrlichman—two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know." Not, he hastened to assure his audience, out of any "implication whatever of personal wrongdoing on their part. . . . But in matters as sensitive as guarding the integrity of our democratic process it is essential not only that rigorous legal and ethical standards be observed but also that the public—*you*—have total confidence that they are both being observed and enforced by those in authority and particularly by the President of the United States."

He also announced that he had let loose his attorney general, Richard Kleindienst—again, not because the individual had done anything wrong but because he was "a close personal and professional associate of some of those who are involved in the case"; and, in passing, that John Dean had resigned also. He explained nothing whatsoever about that.

There came a sort of apology. Nixon had "decided, as the 1972 campaign approached, that the presidency come first and politics second." So "the easiest course would be for me to blame those to whom I delegated the responsibility to run the campaign." He shook his head histrionically: "But that would be a *cowardly* thing to do."

He, instead, would fight for the truth—but not let that distract him from pressing tasks like "reducing the danger of a nuclear war that would destroy civilization as we know it."

That introduced the Checkers-style sanctimony. He listed the goals he had written on Christmas Eve for his second term. They included "to make it possible for our children, and for our children's children, to live in a world of peace." And: "To make this country be more than ever a land of opportunity—of *equal* opportunity, *full* opportunity, for every American." And to "establish a climate of decency and civility."

"There can be no whitewash at the White House," he concluded, and asked for the nation's prayers.

And then he absented himself from the nation's TV screens, left to the mercy of the reviews.

THE MARQUEE EDITORIALISTS GRANTED NIXON THE BENEFIT OF THE doubt. The Associated Press found only two prominent critics of the speech, both Democratic governors: the left-wing John J. Gilligan of Ohio, and the Georgia moderate, Jimmy Carter. Be that as it may, just about every commentator and official of any significance united in a new consensus: Watergate was something historically awful—and the men responsible, whoever they turned out to be, were louts.

Everyone, that is, except Governor Ronald Wilson Reagan of California.

He offered his thoughts after greeting a group of high school visitors in his Sacramento reception room. Reporters asked him about speculation from Barry Goldwater that Reagan might be called to Washington to help reorganize the White House. "That's very kind of the senator," he answered in the third person, "but Ronald Reagan has got his hands full right here." Then he minimized Watergate. It all was part of the usual "atmosphere of campaigning," where pranks were just part of the game. "They did something that was stupid and foolish and was criminal"—then corrected himself: "It was illegal. Illegal is a better word than criminal because I think criminal has a different connotation." He said, "The tragedy of this is that men who are not criminals at heart" had to suffer. It saddened him "that now there is going to have to be punishment."

That Reagan thought the Watergate conspirators were not "criminals at heart" was the headline—"Political Spies Not 'Criminals,'" as the *Los Angeles Times* put it—and a laugh line. NBC's John Chancellor smirked, "Reagan, who talks a lot about 'law and order,' described the burglars as 'well-meaning individuals committed to the reelection of the president.'" Tom Wicker used Reagan, "that exponent of law and order," as Exhibit A in a sermon about what happens in a world run according to the Gospel of Richard Nixon, where good guys were always good no matter what they actually did, bad guys were always and everywhere ontologically evil, and no one will be safe until " 'we' crack down on 'them,' occasionally adopting their tactics."

Ronald Reagan divided the world into good guys and bad guys. Richard Nixon and his team were good guys. So they could not have done evil at all.

Time ran a digest on which prospects to replace Nixon in 1977 were "up" and which were "down." John Connally, the tough former Texas governor, JFK and LBJ intimate, and Nixon treasury secretary, was looking good—he had magnanimously chosen Nixon's difficult week to officially announce he was switching to the Republican Party. The dashing Illinois senator Charles Percy was in great shape after introducing a Senate resolution for an independent Watergate prosecutor. Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York was in good shape for his remoteness from the scandal. Ronald Reagan, however, who "put his foot in his mouth by saying that the Watergate conspirators were not 'criminals at heart,'" was down, down, down. He had just announced that he would not be running for reelection next year, which was interpreted as a move to position himself for a presidential run. Excusing Watergate sure seemed a funny way to begin.

THE NOTION OF REAGAN RUNNING FOR PRESIDENT HAD BEEN IN THE AIR for years. In 1968 he made a surprise last-minute entrance into the nomination fight at the Republican National Convention in Miami—and with heavy initial support from Southern delegates—had come shockingly close to the prize. He had emerged as the hottest politician in the country. For a new issue had arisen in the second half of the 1960s, and Ronald Reagan owned it.

The issue was campus militancy. When he first starting running for governor in 1966, advisors armed with the most sophisticated public opinion research that money could buy told him not to touch it. The last thing they wanted for the candidate who costarred beside a chimp in the film *Bedtime for Bonzo* only fifteen years earlier was for him to associate himself with anti-intellectualism by attacking higher education. In fact, they wanted him to announce his candidacy standing beside two Nobel laureates. What's more, they explained, the student uprising in Berkeley didn't even show up in their polling as a public concern.

He told his experts to go climb a tree. "Look," he lectured them, "I don't care if I'm in the mountains, the desert, the biggest cities of the state, the first question is: 'What are you going to do about Berkeley?' And each time the question itself would get applause.'"

Ronald Reagan knew audiences. It was a key element of his political genius. One of the things at which brilliant politicians are better than mediocre ones is smelling new public concerns over the horizon *before* they are picked up by polls—before the public even knows to call them "issues" at all. "This is how it became an issue," he told interviewers later. "You knew that this was the number one thing on the people's minds."

Berkeley: late in 1964 a police car had rolled onto the middle of the University of California's flagship campus to dislodge a student signing up students for the Mississippi civil rights movement. Thousands gathered around the police car, trapping it, and turning it into a makeshift dais for inspiring, idealistic oratory. The "Free Speech Movement" began, and it soon became the seedbed for a nationwide antiwar movement of unprecedented breadth and intensity. In fashionable circles, the youthful energy represented by the rise of civic activism among college students was judged a tonic. Even aging Republicans got in on the act. "I think the people of your age have a function right now," Dwight D. Eisenhower told the 1966 graduates at Kansas State University. "My generation and even those who are younger have grown pessimistic and lethargic. You people can do much for your elders." NBC's David Brinkley praised "a new generation of students who demand to find their own way in a society filled with social crisis."

Reagan, on the other hand, quipped, "I'd like to harness their youthful energy with a strap." And said he wished Congress would declare war in Vietnam, so "the anti-Vietnam demonstrations and the act of burning draft cards would be treasonable"—which is to say, punishable by death. (His own opinion on ending the war, expressed in October 1965, was "It's silly talking about how many years we will have to spend in the jungles of Vietnam when we could pave the whole country and put parking stripes on it and still be home by Christmas.")

Excoriating student protest came naturally to him. College was at the heart of his sentimental imagination—Frank Merriwell and all that—but it was also where he learned once and for all that heroes were not just for storybooks. "As far as I'm concerned everything good that has happened to me—everything—started on this campus," he put it at a 1980 campaign appearance at his alma mater, Eureka College, decked out in a vintage football jersey in the school colors of maroon and gold.

Eureka: "Sounds like the name of a college in a movie," a Hollywood columnist wrote in a 1949 profile. Dutch became aware of the little campus operated by the Disciples of Christ when his hometown hero Garland Waggoner became a football star there. He said that upon his first visit to its few modest redbrick, ivy-covered buildings, he "wanted to get into that school so badly it hurt when I thought about it." Getting there and staying there had been no easy thing: rural America was in an agricultural depression even before the Great Crash of 1929. Then the Depression put Jack Reagan's Fashion Boot Shop out of business. Overselling his football prowess, downplaying his B average, Reagan talked his way into a $180 athletic scholarship, paying the rest of his way washing dishes, lifeguarding, and coaching the swim team he himself helped establish. (He had never swum in a real pool before.) That made quite a contrast to the entitled brats tearing down Berkeley. Part of what made Berkeley such a powerful issue for traditionally Democratic voters was class resentment—something Ronald Reagan understood in his bones.

College to him meant something specific—an arena of knights-errant and blushing damsels; contests of manly derring-do; and, yes, even intellectual exploration. (Disdain for learning was one of the things that made the foppish *Brown of Harvard* so contemptible.) Immediately, he pledged a fraternity. (He never seemed more apoplectic during the Berkeley crisis than when he announced he had learned a left-wing professor was biased against boys wearing fraternity caps.) He scored a room in the fraternity house's converted attic with a panoramic view of his new proving ground. (Henceforth whenever he moved into a new home it was almost always one with a panoramic view; life was more

dramatic that way). And soon an opportunity to cast himself as Frank Merriwell arrived—when, three months into his freshman year, nearly the entire student body went on strike to demand the resignation of the school's unpopular president.

No one either then or now—no attentive eyewitnesses, no diligent historians, no reporters who covered the exciting events for the *Chicago Tribune*, not the Associated Press, not even the *New York Times*—has ever been able to come up with a coherent explanation of precisely why the strike happened. Some blamed flapper-besotted students frustrated with President Bert Wilson's refusal to lift a ban against dancing. Another theory held the opposite: the instigators were moralists annoyed at Wilson's indifference to campus dissipation. Or that, following a trip to New York, he tried to force fancy new administrative theories on the college, which alienated his colleagues. Others note a professional rivalry with a popular professor who had been passed over for Wilson's job (and who, according to some accounts, orchestrated the entire affair from behind the scenes, from fanning fears of staff cuts to spreading rumors that Wilson's daughter was a sex fiend). Or maybe it was just that students were bored.

A fog of crosscutting motives and narratives, a complexity that defies storybook simplicity: that is usually the way history happens.

But not, however, in the mind of Ronald Reagan.

He made the strike the centerpiece of his 1965 memoir, writing just as Berkeley was becoming an epicenter for the national campus revolt. In Reagan's morality tale, President Bert Wilson, Scrooge-like, had decided to impose "such a drastic cutback academically that many juniors and seniors would have been cut off without the courses needed for graduation in their chosen majors"—"cutting the heart out of the college." Wilson then rammed the plan through the board of trustees "[w]ithout a thought of consulting students or faculty," who both responded "with a roar of fury."

But not, Reagan insisted, with *too* much fury: students responded with "no riotous burning in effigy but a serious, well-planned program, engineered from the ground up by students but with the full support and approval of almost every professor on the campus." ("I get a bit smug when I contrast that college strike to some of the . . . fevered picketing of these more modern times," he later told a correspondent; the contrast was surely in his mind when an effigy at Berkeley bearing a sign reading REDUCE REAGAN BY 10% was hung the first month of his governorship by students protesting *his* budget cuts.)

In his telling, students then devised a counterplan that reorganized

the university according to all of President Wilson's stated aims, which Wilson then rejected. So they raised up a petition to present to the board of directors, demanding his resignation. "The board met on the last Saturday before Thanksgiving vacation," Reagan wrote—a dirty trick, by which they might sign off on the president's foul deed before the students had a chance to fight it, the cuts presented as a fait accompli when they helplessly returned from vacation.

Then . . .

Every great adventure story needs a suspenseful turning point—a moment of high drama upon which everything stands or falls. And in the imagination of Ronald Reagan, nothing heightens drama better than a football game.

"The football team met Illinois College that afternoon," he wrote. But the crowd, he said, was distracted. He presents a striking visual image: "In the second half, newsboys hit the stands with extras headlining the fact that our petition to the board had been denied. Looking back from the bench was like looking at a card stunt"—that stadium ritual where spectators hold up coordinated color cards to trace out images. "Everyone was hidden by a newspaper." Afterward no one left for Thanksgiving. "We all remained on campus, waiting until midnight for the summit to break up." The college bell tolled; "as prearranged as Paul Revere's ride," the school chapel filled with students and faculty.

Dramatically, just in the nick of time, evil was foiled

Enters our star—a lowly freshman, just like his favorite Yale hero: "it was my turn to come off the bench. It had been decided that the motion for putting our plan into effect should be presented by a freshman." He took the stage. He gave a brilliant speech. "When I came to actually present the motion there was no need for parliamentary procedure: they came to their feet with a roar—even the faculty members present voted by acclamation. It was heady wine. Hell, with two more lines I could have had them riding through 'every Middlesex village and farm'—without horses yet.' . . . In the end it was our policy of polite resistance that brought victory. After a week, the new president resigned." And so they received "an education in human nature and the rights of man to universal education that nothing could erase from our psyches. . . . The four classes on campus became the most tightly knit groups ever to graduate from Eureka. . . . Campus spirit bloomed. A remarkably close bond to the faculty developed."

HERE IS THE PROBLEM: MANY OF THESE EVENTS ARE MATTERS OF record—which contradicts Reagan's story at almost every point. The

showdown meeting took place on a Tuesday, for instance, not a football Saturday. Nobody else remembered Ronald Reagan saving the day; he appears in no contemporary newspaper account. "You know, I read that part of his autobiography on Eureka College," a classmate told a writer decades later, "and I wondered whether he and I went to the same school. This thing is pretty dreamy."

But it is true he did emerge shortly after the strike as an incipient Big Man on Campus. Maybe he was being honored for his ability *after* the event to present the fog of bureaucratic war as a simple morality tale to a confused student body, giving students the clarity they needed to bind themselves together in the wake of an acrimonious conflict. We do, after all, tell stories in order to live.

In February the freshman made his first appearance in the school paper's gossip column: "Dutch Reagan's debut as cheer leader in the Normal cage"—that is, at the basketball auditorium at Illinois State Normal University—"was very much in his favor . . . He was full of spirit and the Normal rooters followed him almost perfectly." He began playing the lead in school plays; the word that reappears in reviews is "presence." He also began wearing dark horn-rimmed glasses, like Harold Lloyd's in *The Freshman*, eagerly stitching himself into the elaborate rituals of 1920s varsity life—"'E' Tribe"; a seventy-fifth anniversary pageant set in the "Forest Primeval"; pep rallies, in whose defense he wrote an impassioned jeremiad, signed "Dutch Reagan," imagining sports as savior of his school's floundering Depression-era fortunes:

> *"Eureka Spirit"—it is advertised and upheld as something superior to that of other schools. But is it? . . . Let's live basketball and Eureka till Mac's Red Devils take Illinois College in the last game of the season. It's our year in at least three major sports. Now let's get a freshman class in here of over one hundred and let's go home and wake up the Christian churches to the fact that this is their school and they owe it their support. "Let's get in there and pitch"!*

In sports where he wasn't skilled enough for conference competition, he found other ways to make himself indispensable. For instance, a classmate remembered him as the basketball team's regular yell leader—"one of the best we've ever had. He turned that crowd upside down . . . a whale of a good cheerleader." He became the football team's tackling dummy: "Although 'Dutch' failed to get much competition this season he has the determination and fight to finally win out, if he sticks to football throughout his college career," his sophomore yearbook read. "He never gives up when the odds are against him." Maybe he wrote that; he

was on the yearbook staff. Or maybe he didn't: "He never quit," Coach McKenzie—another new surrogate father—remembered. "Others did." (He scored his only touchdown in a game at Illinois State Normal College, he told reporters in 1982—"lowering himself to the Oval Office floor, showing how he picked up an ISNU fumble, then lurched up to recreate a frantic romp to the end zone.") His coach even figured into his story about why his grades weren't impressive. Dutch claimed he flubbed them on purpose—a happy ending. "I was afraid if my grades were good I might end up an athletic teacher at some small school. I wanted more than [Coach] Mac had."

In his junior year he added the Booster Club, and displayed an interest in international politics: on March 22, 1931, a "lively discussion over world peace and the chances of another war" was led by "Ronald Reagan, better known as Dutch . . . and as the saying goes, 'he needs no introduction.'" By the next school year he was senior class president.

THERE WAS ONE COLLEGE DETAIL THAT ONLY HIS CLASSMATES REMEMBERED; Reagan never spoke of it himself. They recalled how the Reagan brothers staged the school's first homecoming dance—"the biggest thing seen here in years"—charging their classmates a premium to attend, and splitting the proceeds. Another recollection of a classmate that never found its way into Reagan's self-representations: in 1932, he bet five of his fraternity brothers that within five years he would be making five thousand dollars a year. His girlfriend recalled that he told them if he didn't make that much, "I'll consider these four years here wasted."

The stories he chose to tell, tell a story in themselves, as do those he chose not to.

"We had a special spirit at Eureka," he wrote, "that bound us all together, much as a poverty-stricken family is bound": tuition fees "made no pretense of covering the actual cost of an education," and many students couldn't pay the tuition anyway; the endowment was inadequate, so professors would "go for months without pay"; part of the endowment was a farm, from whose produce the school sometimes paid its debts. "Oh, it was a small town, a small school, with small doings. It was in a poor time without money, without ceremony, with pleasant thoughts of the past to balance fears of the uncertain future. But it somehow provided the charm and enchantment which alone can make a memory of a school something to cherish." In Ronald Reagan's recollections of Eureka there could never be anything venal (except in the person of President Bert Wilson, because he was a villain).

That made quite a contrast with the "multiversity"—as Chancellor

Clark Kerr termed the sprawling campuses of the University of California system. Reagan traversed the state in 1966 offering an image yoking protesters who believed themselves the moral equivalent of the Founding Fathers to that varsity culture of the 1920s: "I'm sorry they did away with paddles in fraternities." He isolated the villains: Chancellor Kerr, for entertaining the students' grievances, and Governor Pat Brown, ex officio member of the Board of Regents, for not having immediately taken the ringleaders "by the scruff of the neck and thrown them off campus—personally." That would "put the rest of them back to work doing their homework." When *he* was governor, Reagan said, the watchword would be "obey the rules or get out." The tactics of what they called the "New Left," he said, better resembled that of the "Old Right," which his generation had fought so hard to defeat—the Nazi Party.

Such perorations would get a rousing ovation every time. And that, even more than singling out alleged abuses of California's welfare system by "able-bodied malingerers," or his fulminations against the violation of economic liberty represented by the state's new statute outlawing racial discrimination in housing, or high taxes and runaway government spending generally, was how he won his stunning upset victory.

Then, when it became Governor Reagan's job to superintend the university upon his inauguration in 1967, he wrangled control of the Board of Regents in order to have Clark Kerr fired, wrested from the nine campus chancellors their final authority to appoint faculty, and instituted tuition for the first time in the system's history. It was *not* the business of the state, he said, "to subsidize intellectual curiosity"—the intellectual curiosity of students whom he sometimes labeled "brats," "freaks," and "cowardly fascists," but whose "academic freedom" he insisted he himself guarded as zealously as a crusading knight. Except, however, when he did not: "Academic freedom does *not* include attacks on other faculty members or on the administration of the university," the former student striker once scowled on TV, "or seeking to incite incidents on other campuses." When one of the founders of the New Left group Students for a Democratic Society was recruited to the faculty at the campus in Santa Barbara, Reagan said that was like hiring an arsonist to work at a fireworks factory.

It made him a national political star. Of the sixty-seven times Reagan was featured on the three network newscasts between 1967 and 1970, more than half concerned his stance on campus militancy. For instance, in the fall of 1968, a Berkeley faculty member recruited Black Panther Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver as guest lecturer for Social Analysis 139X—Dehumanization and Regeneration in the American

Social Order. Reagan said if it happened he would investigate the school from "top to bottom"—for "if Eldridge Cleaver is allowed to teach our children, they may come home one night and slit our throats." Cleaver taught anyway, proclaiming in one lecture, "Ronald Reagan is a punk, a sissy, and a coward, and I challenge him to a duel to the death or until he says Uncle Eldridge. I give him a choice of weapons—a gun, a knife, a baseball bat, or marshmallows."

After the Reagan-controlled Board of Regents rebuked Cleaver, a 1,500-student march culminated in the holding of a dean hostage. Reagan, on ABC, scowled: "The calls and the letters make it pretty clear that the people have reached the end of the line, and I don't blame them." When school opened the next semester, San Francisco State College students demanding a new ethnic studies program blockaded campus buildings. Reagan answered with soldiers bearing fixed bayonets. Tear gas flew back and forth, and bonfires illuminated the streets. On NBC Reagan said that the "small group of criminal anarchist and latter-day fascists" whom he held responsible—those who "seek to close down the campuses, our universities, and even our high schools," a goal which was "not in any way to be confused with the traditional and generally acceptable activities of students who always seek change through proper and constructive channels"—would soon receive their comeuppance: "Those who want to get an education and those who want to teach should be protected at the point of a bayonet if necessary."

The next month, the same movement surfaced at Berkeley. He visited the campus for an inspection; a throng started chanting "Fuck Reagan"; the governor responded with an outstretched middle finger. Students shattered the glass door of the building where he was meeting.

It was then that a CBS reporter confronted him with an apparently irrefutable argument: every time he escalated such deployments, conflict only escalated. Reagan responded with the logic of Frank Merriwell at Yale: he was rescuing damsels in distress. "When you see a coed, a girl trying to make her way to class, and she is pushed around, and physically abused for trying to go through the picket line and go to class," he said, "this girl is entitled to have the forces of law and order to defend her right to go to class."

The reporter stood silent, incredulous. He had no idea what this strange man was talking about. Though this strange man, it had to be said, was then enjoying the highest approval ratings of his term.

Later that spring, when Berkeley students forcefully seized a spit of vacant campus land and declared it a "People's Park," Reagan dispatched not just National Guard troops but a Sikorsky helicopter that spewed

tear gas at students cornered into a crowded campus square. A student was shot observing events from a rooftop. Reagan said, "The police didn't kill the young man. He was killed by the first college administrator who said some time ago it was all right to break the laws in the name of dissent." His address at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco defending the military deployment—he was beating back, he said, "a revolutionary movement involving a tiny minority of faculty and students finding concealment and shelter in an entire college generation. . . . Stand firm and the university can dispose of this revolution within the week"—made all three networks.

The following year, as bomb scares swept the nation following the conviction of seven New Left activists for conspiring to disrupt the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, UC Santa Barbara students burned down a Bank of America branch. Marx-minded student leaders welcomed such incidents as "heightening the contradictions"—a necessary precursor to the longed-for revolution. Reagan barked back, four days before the shootings at Kent State: "If it's to be a bloodbath, let it be now. No more appeasement."

Hard to know how a politician could bounce back from *that* in an election year. Or so said his detractors. Instead, he won reelection overwhelmingly. *Life* profiled him that fall as "The Hottest Candidate in Either Party," noting, however, that Reagan had "failed almost completely to keep his campaign promises of 1966—the cost of higher education and welfare has risen hideously, California campuses have remained battlegrounds, and his 'tax reform' has been turned down in the legislature." *Life*'s quotation marks signified skepticism about how a tax plan that delivered most benefit to upper incomes counted as reform at all. And yet, even more than in 1966, he attracted thousands of Democrats who'd never imagined voting for a Republican before in their lives. "His most effective campaigners," *Life* explained, "have been those college-based Reagan haters who rioted over People's Park in Berkeley and set fire to the Bank of America's branch in Isla Vista last spring."

A fat lot of good that would do him in 1973, went conventional wisdom, now that the Paris peace settlement had put Reagan's most effective campaigners out of business. A political cartoon told the story: an archaic-looking hippie, like something from another age, held up his picket sign with a peace symbol in one hand and a placard reading UNEMPLOYED in the other. Reagan couldn't even count on the loyalty of Republican conservatives, either: their hearts belonged, as their bumper stickers proclaimed, to "Spiro of '76." And there was this: Vice President Spiro Agnew would be fifty-six at convention time. John Connally

would be fifty-nine. Chuck Percy would be fifty-six—and Reagan, at sixty-five, would be eligible for Social Security. "Around the mouth and neck," George Will of *National Review* wrote, "he looks like an old man."

Ronald Reagan's closest political advisors had been meeting for weekly breakfasts, racking their brains on how to move him into the front ranks of presidential contenders. The plan they arrived at was announced the week after the end of the Vietnam War. Bad accounting and an improving economy had left California with a nearly $1 billion budget surplus. Reagan said he intended to "return the money to taxpayers"—novel language at the time. His method would be unprecedented: the state's first ballot initiative sponsored by a sitting governor. The state made a tactical decision the pundits called ill-advised: to put it on the ballot for November 1973, instead of in 1974. It set off an apparently impossible scramble to get six hundred thousand signatures by June to get it on the ballot. The plan baffled the pundits. George McGovern had made middle-class tax relief a centerpiece of his presidential campaign only a few months earlier; that, obviously, had gone nowhere. The details of the plan devised by four right-wing Reagan advisors—economist Milton Friedman, Martin Anderson, a lawyer named Anthony Kennedy, and Chief of Staff Edwin Meese—were confusing. The aim was to put a ceiling on state taxes and spending. But it seemed to bestow most of its favors on those who were already well-off—and what sort of political sense did a giveaway to the rich make for Ronald Reagan? sneered the *Los Angeles Times* in a May 16 article about allegations that state employees were gathering signatures while on the job. It pointed out revelations that the governor had paid no state income tax in 1970, because of "so-called business losses," and noted his decision to lift a moratorium on offshore drilling in effect since a disastrous 1969 Santa Barbara Channel oil spill. The Democratic state assembly leader Bob Moretti pounced, calling the proposal "economic war on the interests of people in California."

Reagan had a response for that: he was defending an innocent maiden called "the taxpayer" against a devouring beast called "government." He asked, "Are we automatically destined to tax and spend, spend and tax indefinitely, until the people have nothing left of their earnings for themselves? Have we abandoned or forgotten the interests and well-being of the taxpayer whose toil makes government possible in the first place? Or is he to become a pawn in a deadly game of government monopoly whose only purpose is to serve the confiscatory appetites of runaway government spending?"

His opponents scratched their heads at that, too. If Sacramento housed such profligate spenders, why did the state budget have a surplus in the first place? If confiscatory taxes were the aim, why were there no tax increases on the table in the legislature?

Be that as it may, Ronald Reagan was back on the national news once more.

A CBS reporter addressed the camera from the front porch of a clearly gobsmacked housewife, her luxurious home surrounded by perhaps two dozen newsmen and camera operators: "No, it wasn't the Fuller Brush Man making the rounds in Los Angeles this morning. . . ."

"Hello, how are you, it's Ronald Reagan!"

"What a surprise! Wonderful!"

The reporter broke in: "Reagan's problem is that the California legislature has refused to buy his plan for cutting taxes, so the governor was out ringing doorbells getting signatures to bypass the legislature. . . ."

"All right! I'll sign!"

Then next door: *"Hello, Mrs. Marshman."*

Mrs. Marshman literally swooned: the advantage of a matinée idol in politics.

"Reagan wants to roll back California's present personal income tax and ease the future tax bite with a constitutional ceiling on state spending. But his critics are already charging that the stakes are more personal, that the California tax reduction is simply Reagan's first move in an all-out campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. Bill Walker, CBS News, Los Angeles."

Nationally, however, the electorate's attention was elsewhere.

NIGHTCLUB COMICS, LAPEL BUTTONS, AND BUMPER STICKERS TOLD THE story: "Four more years? Maybe ten to twenty." "Don't Blame Me. I voted for McGovern." "Free the Watergate 500." Nixon's approval ratings plunged below 50 percent for the first time. Ministers frantically rewrote their Sunday sermons on "Watergate morality" to keep up with cascading revelations: the indictments of John Mitchell and campaign fund-raiser and former Commerce Secretary Maurice Stans; news that the judge in the Ellsberg case had been offered the FBI directorship as a bribe; White House ties to the forged Diem cables—and the imminent debut of live coverage on May 17 on all three networks and PBS of Senator Ervin's Watergate hearings.

Yet here was Ronald Reagan on May 15 releasing a statement to reporters awaiting his appearance at his regular press conference: "Now that the Watergate controversy is under federal investigation, and is

before a grand jury, the courts, and the Senate, I will make no further statement regarding any of the individuals involved." Because, he said, they were "none of my business." And not much of theirs, either—for Watergate was being "blown out of proportion."

The reporters were astonished. There was something comical about this genial ostrich standing before them, peddling fairy tales in a time when serious moral reckoning with the failings of America's governing institutions was entering the national political conversation as never before.

What they did not recognize was that maybe he was onto something. The previous year, when that entrepreneur in New York announced he would be republishing Frank Merriwell novels as "the country's guide and measuring stick as national singularity is restored," the national media mocked him. Things proved different that spring when a major paperback publisher brought out a long-buried Horatio Alger novel called *Silas Snobden's Office Boy.* The *New York Times* featured it in not one but two decidedly nonpatronizing articles: one found its invitation to an "Eden before Eve" "filled with startling relevances"; the other said, "If it has never been your good fortune to experience pure innocence, then reading an Alger novel is as good a substitute as you will find." A seller's market in innocence was emerging. What the jacket copy advertised as a "LOST TREASURE CHEST OF CHARM AND NOSTALGIA" was just the thing "to rouse the memories of the old, the wonder of the young, the ire of the cynics, and the conscience of post-Watergate America." The *Los Angeles Times* welcomed, at long last, a novel with "no subtle characterizations, no crises of identity, no dark nights of the soul, no whining about fate." *Publishers Weekly* pronounced it "a delight."

It was around then, three days after the Ervin hearings began broadcasting live, that the Democratic electoral analysts Richard Scammon and Benjamin Wattenberg asked in the *Washington Post*, "Does Watergate have coattails?" Possibly not, they concluded. According to the Harris Poll, by a margin of 73 to 15 percent, voters agreed, "Dirty campaign tactics exist among both the Republicans and Democrats. And the Nixon campaign people were no worse than the Democrats, except they got caught at it." Maybe they were satisfied with what Nixon had told them two weeks earlier. Maybe they preferred ostrichlike innocence. The Senate hearings would tell.

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CHAPTER SIX

Sam Ervin

THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY SENATOR SAM ERVIN HAD BEEN A BACKbencher. Now, he was a household name.

White-haired and jiggly-jowled, his long, bushy eyebrows as tangled as a line of Arabic script, with a forehead that all but broke out in spasms in the midst of his high-flown orations, he was almost a caricature of a Dixie courthouse pol. As a senator, he had had no particular accomplishments to his name, in part because his ideology was so idiosyncratic it was hard to imagine him pulling together any sort of legislative coalition. On the one hand, he was a conservative, even a reactionary: deriding federal school integration and the Civil Rights Act, mocking the Equal Rights Amendment (which he hated so much he put his franking privileges at anti-ERA crusader Phyllis Schlafly's disposal), saying the Vietnam War ought to be ended by bombing North Vietnam until it was a parking lot. On the other, he made his first mark as a state legislator in the year of the Scopes Trial, 1925, by speaking out against a ban on the teaching of evolution. ("Monkeys in the jungle," he quipped, "will be pleased to know that the North Carolina legislature has absolved them from any responsibility for humanity in general and for the North Carolina legislature in particular.") As a justice on his state's supreme court he sprung a black man convicted of raping a white woman by carrying out the radical act of actually reading the lower court transcript. ("Boss, we never get off death row," the grateful defendant told him. "We on death row from the day we be here until the day we die.") His maiden speech in the Senate denounced Joseph McCarthy. The majority leader, Lyndon Johnson, was impressed: "You don't scare easily." Sam Ervin most certainly did not.

A simple thread, the senator always claimed, tied everything he believed together: plain devotion to the Constitution as it was written. A *Time* profile explained: "For more than a dozen years, he has chaired hearing after hearing on Constitutional rights and the erosion of the separation of power in all but empty committee rooms." Now, Con-

gress "has decided that it needs a constitutionalist—a man of great legal knowledge and judicial temperament—and in discovering that fact, it has discovered Sam Ervin."

Now the nation discovered him—in an opening statement that displayed the sort of hammy melodrama with which the American public would soon become so familiar: "If the many allegations made to this date are true, then the burglars . . . were in effect breaking into the home of every citizen of the United States." So these proceedings would be "a test of whether the democratic process under which we operate in a nation that still is the last, best hope of man on earth in his eternal struggle to govern himself decently and effectively" could even survive.

Ervin called the first man, though he looked practically like a boy, to the committee's green witness table: Robert C. Odle, twenty-nine, former office manager of the Committee to Re-elect the President—which some newspapers had taken to calling by the onomatopoeic acronym "CREEP." But what took place next, after all that hype, was a sleep-inducing anticlimax.

Dreary Odle delved into an interminable explanation, as dry as dust, of how the committee apportioned and accounted for funds, using the example of briefcases purchased for every state chairman and vice chairman. The 550 spectators, including Daniel Ellsberg and actress Lee Remick, who had been lining up since 5 A.M. to ensure good seats in the overflowing hearing room, where Teapot Dome had been investigated fifty years before and Joseph McCarthy had terrorized witnesses thirty years after that, stifled yawns—as did Chairman Ervin, in a picture that went out over the UPI wires.

A columnist said it was like "watching grass grow." In New York City this soporific show ran on all six TV channels at once. In Chicago, the three network affiliates received more than two thousand phone calls from housewives angry at the preemption of their favorite game shows and soap operas. "The word of the day was 'crap,' as in, 'Why are you showing that Watergate crap?'" the *Tribune* quoted a station employee. "I've never heard that word so many times in a single day."

Then, the next day, the show started getting interesting. The witness was James McCord, and his description of a meeting with a former official of the White House counsel's office and current deputy director for criminal enforcement at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms sounded for all the world like a scene from *The Godfather*.

"Sometime in July 1972, shortly after I got out of jail, which was in June 1972, about midday there was a note in my mailbox at my residence and when I opened the letter, which had not been stamped nor

sent through the mails, it was a note from Jack Caulfield signed 'Jack' which said, 'Go to the phone booth on Route 355 near your home,' and he gave three alternate times at which I could appear at the phone booth for a telephone call from him."

McCord did as he was told. The voice on the telephone had a New York accent and informed him, "I am a friend of Jack's. . . . He will be in touch with you soon."

The story continued, increasingly labyrinthine, like *The Maltese Falcon* or *North by Northwest.* In October 1972 the message was conveyed to McCord that the defendants were to plead guilty and go to prison, and that their families would be provided for financially, and they would be given executive clemency after serving a portion of their term, followed by a guarantee of a job. McCord said he categorically refused to play ball. Then he said he had evidence the White House had tapped the phone at his home.

He spoke of the time, during the burglary trial, when he was finally asked to meet his contact, Jack Caulfield, in person, at "the second overlook on the George Washington Parkway." There, leaning out of his automobile, Caulfield revealed that he had just attended a "law enforcement meeting in San Clemente, California."

Which, everyone in the hearing room and watching TV at home knew, happened to be the location of President Nixon's "Western White House."

His next utterance electrified the room. "Caulfield stated that he was carrying the message of executive clemency to me 'from the very highest levels of the White House.' He said that the President of the United States . . . had been told of the results."

Two or three times, McCord said, he refused the offer. Each time it was repeated—soon, as a threat: "The president's ability to govern is at stake. Another Teapot Dome scandal is possible, and the government may fall. Everybody else is on track but you."

Another meeting with Caulfield. "He stated that I was 'fouling up the game plan.'"

("Game plan": Nixon buffs knew that to be a favorite presidential phrase.)

"Get closer to your attorney," he was told.

(His attorney had been furnished and paid for by the reelection committee.)

"'Do not talk if called before a grand jury, keep silent, and do the same if called before a congressional committee.'"

(The congressional committee was rapt.)

"'You know that if the administration gets its back to the wall, it will have to take steps to defend itself.'"

He then said that on the night before his sentencing, "Jack called me and said that the administration would provide . . . $100,000 in cash if I could tell him how to get it funded through an intermediary. I said that if we ever needed it I would let him know. I never contacted him thereafter, neither have I heard from him."

The panel members began their questioning, incredulous. They asked for clarification: Had he actually said operations to spy on Democrats had been planned . . . *in the attorney general's office*? That Liddy had proposed a budget of $450,000 in that meeting, and had spent $7,000 just on the charts to lay it out? And then held up typed plans for entry into DNC headquarters while claiming the superior who had approved them was . . . Charles Colson, *the president's closest political aide*? That the June 17, 1972, burglary was actually a *second* break-in, to fix malfunctioning bugs installed weeks earlier?

All this James McCord blandly affirmed.

Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii quizzed him about the concept of "deniability"—a new concept for much of the public. Was it true that the operation was designed in conjunction with John Mitchell, but set up so that if it were discovered, the former attorney general could plausibly lie that he had had nothing with it?

Yes, McCord replied, that was true, too.

Then Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee diverted the direction of the questioning to a theme the panelists would return to over and over that summer. They never could quite believe the answers they were receiving.

"Mr. McCord," asked Senator Baker, "please tell me whether or not you knew that this sort of activity was illegal? . . . What was your motivation? Why did you do this?"

Because, McCord responded, he believed he was following orders that had come from the attorney general of the United States. And because he was daily receiving intelligence reports that antiwar groups associated with George McGovern were planning violence "that would endanger the lives of people at the Republican National Convention."

Concerning the question of executive clemency: why, he was asked by one of the panel's Republicans, Senator Edward Gurney of Florida, had he testified about it only reluctantly? "Because," he said, "it involved directly, in my opinion, the President of the United States."

At that, Gurney, Nixon's most dyed-in-the-wool loyalist on the committee, abruptly changed the subject. But now the awful question

was out there: was the President of the United States the one behind it all? And what retaliation did witnesses fear if they revealed it?

THE COMMITTEE RECONVENED TUESDAY AFTERNOON, MAY 22, WITH McCord still at the witness table. A man burst into the hearing room, waved his arms in the president's trademark Churchillian "V for victory" salute, and cried at the top of his lungs, "My name is Ed Kelley and I'm announcing for the President of the United States!" His companion was wrestled from the hearing room before she had a chance to bellow her own intervention: to demand that President Nixon be brought to the witness table—to be asked, she said, "Richard Milhous Nixon, are you guilty?" In fact, she told reporters gathered around her outside the hearing room, "We are all guilty. We all have to come of age and realize where we have been when all this happened." Even soap opera addicts could plainly see that daytime television did not get much more dramatic than this.

A housewife wrote to the *Louisville Courier-Journal:* "I've served notice to my family. I do not intend to sauté an onion, dust a tabletop, nor darn a sock while these hearings are on. I wouldn't miss a word for the world." Volume at the New York Stock Exchange plummeted; brokers preferred to crowd around portable television sets (Watergate got more coverage than the fact that inflation was at its highest level in twenty-two years). On the funny pages a woman cast a glance over to her husband stretched out on his La-Z-Boy: "During the Watergate hearings, he got hooked on daytime TV and hasn't done a lick of work since." Some high schools suspended classes, set up TVs in the cafeteria, and turned the hearings into a makeshift all-day civics lesson. The *Boston Globe* reported sixty students crowded around the set in "the main corner of one of the great universities," and that across campus "a faculty group kept another set going all morning and afternoon." Washington was at a standstill. "A lot of people didn't show up yesterday," the maître d' at the legendary Capitol Hill expense account restaurant Sans Souci complained. "I guess they were home watching television."

A Maryland congressman named William O. Mills had been watching. He was found shot to death with a twelve-gauge shotgun the day after it was disclosed that he had failed to report a $25,000 contribution to his congressional campaign from the Committee to Re-elect the President, in violation of Maryland law. In one of his seven suicide notes he said he had done nothing wrong, but since he could not prove his innocence he saw death as the only solution.

And they were watching at the White House, where a young staffer

told an AP reporter, "I sit in constant fear that somehow my name will come up." But no one was watching, claimed Ronald Ziegler, who *Time* magazine's Hugh Sidey wrote now "presides in front of his pale blue backdrop every morning with a large, uncomprehending sadness behind his eyes." Said Ziegler: "The president had been much too busy to tune in." Though not too busy, apparently, to release a four-thousand-word statement the day the hearings opened. The *New York Times* bannered it across the entire front page: *"NIXON CONCEDES WIDE WHITE HOUSE EFFORT TO CONCEAL SOME ASPECTS OF WATERGATE; CITES HIS CONCERN OVER NATIONAL SECURITY."*

The statement read like a forest ranger seeking to contain wildfires. He copped to authorizing a program of wiretaps between 1969 and 1971; to a 1970 "intelligence plan" that included "authorization for surreptitious entry . . . on specified situations related to national security"; and the establishment in 1971 "of a Special Investigations Unit in the White House," operating "under extremely tight security rules," to "plug leaks of vital national security information." He later claimed calamities would have befallen the nation had he done anything different. But each action, he insisted, had been legal and justified.

The wiretaps had been revealed in a Seymour Hersh *Times* story ten days earlier. Nixon said they were "legal under the authorities then existing" and necessary to save secret negotiations to end the war and limit nuclear arms. The 1970 intelligence plan story had been broken on May 21 by Senator Stuart Symington: it revealed that a document by a young White House staffer named Tom Charles Huston recommended lawbreaking to collect intelligence on U.S. citizens. The president said that plan had been a response to "gun battles between guerrillas and police," and the bomb threats sweeping the nation, but had been rejected five days after its submission. As for the "Special Investigations Unit"—that was the group colloquially known as the "Plumbers"—it was necessary to plug leaks that had grown so grave, "other governments no longer knew whether they could deal with the United States in confidence." About their side activities breaking into offices: well, he said he had known nothing about that. Nor the subsequent coverups, clemency offers, "illegal or improper campaign tactics," bribery of Watergate defendants, offers of executive clemency, nor attempts to implicate the CIA.

"With hindsight," he concluded, "it is apparent that I should have given more heed to the warning signals I received along the way about a Watergate coverup and less to the reassurances" he'd been getting

from others. But everything *he* had done, he reassured the nation, was legal. And it had been done only to protect us from enemies foreign and domestic—for reasons of "national security": the document repeated the phrase twenty-two times.

This time, the reviews were dreadful. The *Times* said the statement had "the quality of a lawyer's brief on behalf of a client trying to defend himself." A political cartoonist showed Nixon wrapped in an American flag, simpering, "Help! My name is National Security and I'm being threatened!" Another depicted a flag emblazoned across Nixon's chest covered with hundred-dollar bills and "Mexico" stickers. In a third, the president pulled a giant American flag curtain across a theater proscenium marked "Watergate investigations" and announced, "That's all, folks!"

On May 19 the new attorney general nominee, whom the president had introduced in his April 30 speech, Elliot Richardson, appointed Archibald Cox, his former professor at the Harvard Law School, as Watergate independent prosecutor. In Richardson's confirmation hearings he had pledged Cox would have "full authority" to investigate the scandal. But Richardson's stipulation that as attorney general he would retain "ultimate power of removal over the special prosecutor" introduced a note of controversy into the proceedings—how independent would the independent prosecutor truly be? So Richardson, a suave Brahmin of the Eastern elite, gave his personal pledge he would not "countermand or interfere with the special prosecutor's decisions or actions." Cox stood next to Richardson at a press conference and pronounced himself satisfied he had all the independence and authority he required to bring the guilty to justice even if the evidentiary trail should take him straight to the Oval Office. On May 24, the Senate confirmed Richardson, 82 votes to 3. Ronald Reagan still wondered what all the fuss was about. He said Watergate was "not criminal, just illegal."

THANK GOD, NIXON HAD TO THINK, A PRESIDENT HAD THE POWER TO stage useful distractions. The week before the hearings began, he announced Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev would visit the United States in the middle of June, for the first time since 1967 (which surely would consume some of the oxygen that might otherwise be devoted to the first anniversary of the Watergate break-in, on June 17). And then, on the day of Richardson's confirmation, the Vietnam POWs descended on Washington, D.C., for their most rousing patriotic spectacle yet.

The festivities began with a presidential speech (officially a "briefing") to more than five hundred POWS decked out in blinding dress

whites at the State Department amphitheater. The subject was his tormenters in the media and on Capitol Hill who accused him of excessive secrecy. "Had we not had . . . that kind of secrecy," he said, "you men would still be in Hanoi rather than in Washington today." He added, pumping the words out with rhythmic intensity, "I think it is time to stop making heroes out of those who steal secrets and publish them in newspapers." At the reference to the Pentagon Papers, the standing ovation lasted for over a minute.

The heroes moved out to a mammoth red-and-yellow circus-style tent, two by two with their dates, more than a thousand guests flown in for the occasion at government expense—the biggest dinner in White House history, the press was informed. There, the president toasted the Christmas bombings to another standing ovation. He praised the POW wives as the "First Ladies of America." Then—the same day a *Chicago Tribune* cartoon depicted a gaggle of housewives worshipping a golden calf and an anthropologist observing, "I think it started when steak went to three dollars a pound"—they settled down to a sirloin steak banquet.

The president seemed almost giddy. He shook hands with every single one of the more than six hundred men, some for a minute at a time, as if their energy might rub off on him. He led a rousing chorus of the "POW Hymn," composed by Air Force Colonel Quincy Collins in the Hanoi facility known as the "Zoo" in 1969. He went to bed looking forward to the next day's blanket coverage. But the utterances from the green witness table sucked up all the media oxygen instead.

The former FBI agent who had monitored the DNC bugging from a listening post in a Howard Johnson's hotel room across the street explained how he'd been dispatched to spy on congressional offices. Cuban burglar Bernard Barker was asked why he'd been willing to participate in burglaries. He replied that the operation had been presented to him as "a matter of national security" ordered by a level "above FBI and CIA." Senator Baker wondered what would motivate a World War II hero, a successful businessman, "to do something that you knew to be illegal." At that things got downright surreal: "Senator," Barker replied, "E. Howard Hunt, under the name of Eduardo, represents to the Cuban people their liberation." Herman Talmadge of Georgia asked who he thought backed the operation. He answered, Nuremberg-style, "Sir, I was there to follow orders, not to think."

The gallery laughed. Barker, however, choked up. "I am part of a team with which I am very proud to be associated. We'll have to live with the term 'burglar.' But we resent, very emotionally, the words that we were 'hired.' There was no need to buy our silence. We were not for

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